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CLASS MEETINGS IN RELATION
TO THE
DESIGN AND SUCCESS
OF
METHODISM.

REV. S. W. CHRISTOPHERS.



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BY

S. W. CHRISTOPHERS.

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P R E F A C E.

THE design of this volume is to trace the connection between Class-Meetings and the original purpose of Methodism. It is intended to pursue this design so as to show the true relation of the Class-Meeting to the world and to the Church ; to mark its necessary association with Methodist preaching and with the work of conversion ; to define its place in relation to the Sacraments and Methodist services of devotion ; to examine into its vital connection with Methodist Agencies and Methodist Finance ; to show that no objections have as yet weakened its claims ; and that just as its claims are neglected, the true prosperity of Methodism declines.

This theme will recommend itself to Methodists chiefly ; but it has a deep interest, too, for other sections of Christian people, especially for those who would devoutly inquire into the comparative fitness of Church organizations for the accomplishment of the Saviour's purposes in the world. And it is hoped that the spirit, tone, and manner of the volume may prove such as will, at least, commend the question which it treats to the calm and thoughtful *attention of all prayerful readers.*

The writer is free to confess that to him the Class-Meeting is associated with so many holy memories, and so long a succession of personal aids, deliverances, and comforts, that to record his thoughts about it has been a work of love.

Nor would he think it other than an honour, of which he is far from being worthy, should he be thought to advocate rather than discuss the merits of an institution to which he owes some of the richest joys of life.

S. W. C.

CLASS-MEETINGS

IN RELATION TO THE DESIGN AND SUCCESS OF METHODISM.

CHAPTER I.

Class-Meetings in their Relation to the Design of Methodism.

In order correctly to estimate the principles and organization of a system, its original design must be clearly understood and steadily kept in view. The grand purpose of a community should be ever before us while we attempt to judge what is or is not important or necessary in that community's machinery. For the essential value of any part of a system or organization must always be in proportion as it promotes the design of the whole. The design of a railway system is, to carry travellers and goods to their destination with the utmost speed, safety, and ease ; and those details of the system are dealt with as of prime importance which most certainly secure the company's main purpose. Methodism is a religious system, remarkable for its clearly defined original purpose, and owes its name to its strict method of suiting its means to its end.

What was the original purpose of Methodism ? The question is answered by the first Methodists : "In 1729, two young men," say they, "in reading the Bible saw they

could not be saved without holiness. . . . They saw likewise, that men are justified before they are sanctified ; but still holiness was their point. God then thrust them out, utterly against their will, to raise a holy people.”* The holiness by which this newly raised people were to be distinguished is defined by Mr. Wesley in his “Character of a Methodist.” “The distinguishing marks of a Methodist are not his opinions of any sort ;” nor “words or phrases of any sort ;” nor “actions, customs, or usages of an indifferent nature ;” nor his “laying the whole stress of religion on any single part of it.” “A Methodist is one who has the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him ; one who ‘loves the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind, and with all his strength.’ God is the joy of his heart, and the desire of his soul ; which is constantly crying out, ‘Whom have I in heaven but Thee ? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside Thee ! My God and my all ! Thou art the strength of my heart and my portion for ever.’ He is therefore happy in God. . . . His ‘perfect love’ having cast out fear, he ‘rejoices evermore’ in God his Saviour—in the forgiveness of his sins—in the witness of the Spirit that he is a child of God—and in hope of the glory that shall be revealed. With his hope thus full of immortality, in everything he gives thanks, cheerfully saying, ‘Good is the will of the Lord.’ . . . He prays without ceasing. At all times the language of his heart is this : ‘Thou brightness of the eternal glory, unto Thee is my heart, though without a voice, and my silence speaketh unto Thee.’ . . . And while he thus exercises his love to God—this commandment is written in his heart ‘that he who loveth God, love his brother also.’ He loves every man as his own soul. . . . For he is ‘pure in heart.’ The love of God has purified his heart from all revengeful passions. . . Agreeable to this his one desire,

* *J. Wesley's Works*, vol. viii., p. 300. Octavo Edition, 1830.

is the one design of his life, namely, not to do his own will, but the will of Him that sent him. . . As he loves God, so he keeps His commandments ; . . . and has on all points ‘a conscience void of offence towards God and towards man.’ . . . His obedience is in proportion to his love. . . He continually presents his soul and body ‘a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God.’ . . . His one invariable rule is this, ‘Whatsoever ye do, in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by Him.’ Nor do the customs of the world at all hinder his running the race that is set before him. He knows that vice does not lose its nature, though it becomes ever so fashionable, and remembers that every man is to give an account of himself to God. . . And as he has time, he does good unto all men ; unto neighbours and strangers, friends and enemies, and that in every possible kind . . . labouring to do good to their souls . . . and is willing to ‘spend and be spent’ herein, even ‘to be offered up on the sacrifice and service of their faith,’ so they may ‘all come unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.’ ” *

The purpose of early Methodism was by no means of narrow range. The “holy people” raised up to exemplify this “character of a Methodist,” were not to be a select few, but a multitude, by whose example, efforts, and influence a holy character was to be given, first to the entire nation, and at last to the ransomed world.

“What,” ask the men who set themselves to this work, “what may we reasonably believe to be God’s design in raising up the Preachers called Methodists ?

“Not to form any new *sect* ; but to reform the nation, particularly the church ; and to spread Scriptural holiness over the land.” †

The heart of one, at least, of those who recorded this

* J. Wesley’s Works, vol. viii., pp. 340—346.

† Ibid., vol. viii., p. 299.

response opens to the light of a still broader field, and cries, "The world is my parish ;" and henceforth that heart, with its kindred Methodist hearts, resolves to aim at filling that world-wide parish with the blessings of "Scriptural holiness." As the marks of a true Methodist are not mere "opinions of any sort," nor any particular "words or phrases," nor indifferent "actions, usages, or customs," nor a fond adoption of any one part of godliness as if it were the whole ; so the design of Methodism is "not to form any new sect." Its aim is not sectarian. It lives for no mere party purpose. It is not its object to maintain a course of ecclesiastical rivalry, or to gather distinct or associated congregations of "hearers only," or to perfect the beauty and harmony of religious rituals, or to secure the perpetual observance of sacramental forms, or to dot the land with buildings into which a combination of architectural charms, musical witchery, and pulpit talent may draw multitudes of contented seat-holders : such things had been done before the rise of Methodism, and the poor results were deplored by the few devoted men who now aimed at calling their fellow-countrymen to strive for a higher standard of Christianity. "We see," said they, "on every side, either men of no religion at all, or men of a lifeless, formal religion. We are grieved at the sight ; and should greatly rejoice if, by any means, we might convince some that there is a better religion to be attained,—a religion worthy of God that gave it. And this we conceive to be no other than love—the love of God and of all mankind, the loving God with all our heart, and soul, and strength, as having first loved *us*, as the Fountain of all the good we have received and of all we ever hope to enjoy ; and the loving every soul which God hath made, every man on earth as our own soul.

"This love we believe to be the medicine of life, the never failing remedy for all the evils of a disordered world, for all

the miseries and vices of men. Wherever this is, there are virtue and happiness going hand in hand. There is humbleness of mind, gentleness, long-suffering, the whole image of God ; and at the same time a peace that passeth all understanding, and joy unspeakable and full of glory.

‘Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind ;
Each prayer accepted, and each wish resign’d ;
Desires composed, affections ever even,
Tears that delight, and sighs that waft to heaven.

“This religion we long to see established in the world, a religion of love and joy and peace, having its seat in the inmost soul, but ever showing itself by its fruits, continually springing forth, not only in all innocence, (for love worketh no ill to his neighbour,) but likewise in every kind of beneficence, spreading virtue and happiness all around it.

“This religion have we been following after for many years, as many know, if they would testify : but all this time, seeking wisdom, we found it not ; we were spending our strength in vain. And being now under full conviction of this, we declare it to all mankind ; for we desire not that others should wander out of the way as we have done before them ; but rather that they may profit by our loss, that they may go (though we did not, having then no man to guide us) the straight way to the religion of love, even by faith.

“By this faith we are saved from all uneasiness of mind, from the anguish of a wounded spirit, from discontent, from fear and sorrow of heart, and from that inexpressible listlessness and weariness, both of the world and of ourselves, which we had so helplessly laboured under for many years ; especially when we were out of the hurry of the world and sunk into calm reflection. In this we find that love of God and of all mankind which we had elsewhere sought in vain. *This we know and feel, and therefore cannot but*

declare, saves every one that partakes of it, both from sin and misery, from every unhappy and every unholy temper.

‘ Soft peace she brings, wherever she arrives ;
She builds our quiet, as she forms our lives ;
Lays the rough paths of peevish nature even,
And opens in each breast a little heaven. ’ ” *

Thus, Wesley, in his “ Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion,” places before us clearly and fully the original design of Methodism. In the light of this design we are best prepared for estimating the means by which the end proposed was to be attained. But before we look at the provisions of Methodism within itself, the question may occur, Does reason, or Scripture, or history, or experience, either or all of them, suggest any principle or practice as necessary, or of prime importance, in the pursuit of a purpose so pre-eminently high and holy ?

Constituted as human nature is, no man, whatever his genius, mental power or heart, will resolve on a noble and gracious purpose to benefit his fellows, and give himself to the work of its accomplishment, without feeling and admitting his obligation to that law of reason which declares that, what man is unequal to while single handed, it may be possible for him to realize when in combination with others of like mind with himself, and that the probability of success will heighten just as the combination engages the deeper and purer principles and affections of our social nature. The Word of God is always in harmony with sound reason. Both are from the One Infinite Mind. The sacred Scriptures throughout recognize and honour the social character of man, and all its commands respecting association in good works are founded on the principle that mutual efforts to bless mankind are effective so far as our mutual sympathies and desires are unitedly expressed and

* *J. Wesley's Works*, vol. viii., pp. 3—5.

outspoken to one another. The principle and practice of spiritual "fellowship" among God's children are recorded by the Spirit as essential not only to the maintenance of the true faith from age to age, but to the diffusive power of holy example and the success of the church in its efforts to save the world from sin. The believing converts of the early church were multiplied from time to time because they "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers."

In this record of the apostolic journal, the Spirit of Truth sketches the essential features of the newborn church; and puts His seal upon the necessary means by which a faithful church has to fulfil the purposes of its new and holy life. There is the cultivation of firm attachment to saving truth resulting in a diligent and constant attention to the teaching of authorized preachers; but that is to be in unbroken association with the practical "fellowship" of the hearers. Nor is a punctual and earnest devotion to times and order of "prayers" more important to the Divine business of the church than the free, cheerful and pious intercourse and table-talk of the sanctified household. The "fellowship" and family-like communion which was thus exemplified in ceaseless unity with preaching, teaching, and prayers, would seem to belong to the deeper life and inmost power of the Christian Society in that it was analogous to the fellowship and communion which spiritual believers have with God the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. The teachings of inspired men were given to the primitive disciples that, as St. John says to them, "Ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ;"* and that, as St. Paul prays they might enjoy "the communion of the Holy Ghost."† Their fellowship or communion among themselves was to be akin to their fellowship or communion

* *1 John i. 3.*

† *2 Corinthians xiii. 14.*

with the Sacred Persons, with Whom they lived in divine companionship. It was to be like fellowship, whether with the Divine or the human companions ; alike spiritual, alike happy, alike in the clearness, power, and intelligence of its mutual expression.

What was thus shown as a living pattern by the first believers in Christ is enforced by apostles as a duty on the churches of after times. Love is to be the Christian law, "the law of Christ." Love is the ruling joy of Christ's disciples, their bond of union and the inspiring power by which alone they are to carry out their mission in the world. "This commandment have we from Him, That he who loveth God love his brother also." * The fulfilment of this law is never realized without that communion of heart and hand to which Paul and Barnabas were introduced when James, Cephas, and John gave to them "the right hand of fellowship;" and which Paul himself enforced on the churches as essential to consistency with their calling, when he said, "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ," † an intelligent expression of mutual sympathy, free interchange of experimental Christian knowledge, fellowship in counsel, and community of spiritual joys, as well as an affectionate sharing of temporal necessities and sufferings, all enter into the essential Christian duty of bearing "one another's burdens." It is the nature of love to "do good;" and the law of love issued by Apostolic lips has for ever linked the duty of doing good with the grace of fellowship among those who do it. And what Divine law has joined together, no other law can put asunder. "To do good and to communicate forget not : for with such sacrifices God is well pleased." ‡ To "do good unto all men," both to their souls and bodies, is the noblest purpose of Christian benevolence ; but the members of that church whose purpose it

* *I John iv. 21.*

† *Galatians vi. 2.*

‡ *Hebrews xiii. 16.*

is, must not forget that giving out of goodness which is due, "especially unto them who are of the household of faith ;" * they must not forget to keep themselves equal to their design towards all men by "communicating" among themselves, or, as the term is at other times rendered, by maintaining "fellowship" with one another, fellowship such as they have with their Divine Head, a happy interchange of thought and feeling, with responsive utterances of heart to heart, voice to voice. "Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering ; (for He is faithful that promised;) and let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works : not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is ; but exhorting one another ; and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching." †

The highest purposes of the Christian profession require the safe guardianship of "the faith once delivered to the saints ;" but still more certainly will you be ready for your great work, if you lovingly seek to understand one another so as to enjoy spiritual intercourse, and by kind and brotherly offices excite one another to the warm pursuit of your high calling, till you kindle into a holy paroxysm of zeal, and bless the world by your harmonious and beautiful action. If this is to be done you must guard against the plausible pretences and loose example of those who lightly neglect social religious gatherings for mutual encouragement, and vainly suppose that the high and holy purposes of Christian fellowship can be fulfilled by a formal observance of the ancient ritual. No, you must never lose one of your distinctive advantages as Christians. You must pass by no privileged opportunity of instructing, admonishing, persuading, and cheering one another in the pursuit of your holy purpose ; the more diligently helping each other to use all means as you near the end ;

* *Galatians vi. 10.*

† *Hebrews x. 23—25.*

the more earnestly contending in holy emulation as the prize more clearly opens on your sight. Thus the Word of God proposes to the Church in the form of example, and enforces by precept what right reason would suggest as necessary to the accomplishment of its grand design.

History, too, has a voice in this. It reveals with more or less of clearness the thought and feeling which have swayed the professing Church in the regulation of its action and the shaping of its course as well as in the choice of its objects and the direction of its aim. The memorials of successive struggles to preserve the faith of Christ against a hostile world have been kept from decay. Profane annals, as well as Church chronicles, show that amidst all changes and through all corruptions the true calling of Christians has never been entirely lost sight of. While the course of action most in keeping with the true design of the Church has been unceasingly indicated even by its most lifeless and merely monumental forms. The history of its creeds alone testifies to an undying impression of the original duty and privilege of successfully pursuing its divine aim by the happy observance of most suitable means. Belief in "the Holy Catholic Church" and "life everlasting" has always been one with professed "communion of saints." Christianity, on this traditional showing, can as well be without an object as without a bond of union. It might as well dispense with its hope of glory at "the resurrection" as with its present fellowship of living members. And by perpetuating its belief in the "communion of saints," it testifies from age to age that its calling cannot be fulfilled without a spiritual union and intercourse of its members on earth, analogous to its loving oneness and real communion with its Divine Lord. Its liturgies may be observed, its prayers uttered, its hymns and anthems sung, without any spiritual communion between those who join in the form of service. The Word of God

may be heard with regularity without the least interchange of spiritual sympathy among the hearers. Communicants may gather at the Lord's Table, and partake of the "one bread" and the "one cup," without any mutual recognition of each other's spiritual claims, and without the most distant approach to fellowship of heart or intercourse of spirit. These ordinances alone have not kept the Church up to a lofty aim, much less have they been adequate means to the completion of its great design. No, "the communion of saints" is something more. The Church must exemplify that something in this life, if it would answer its main purpose and have its "full consummation of bliss" in life everlasting.

History shows, too, with more or less of impressiveness, how deeply at times Christian communities have felt the profounder meaning of their adopted creed; and how they have manifested an undying sense of the necessity of spiritual communion or fellowship and devout interchange of thought and feeling among the children of "the household of faith." Ascetic brotherhoods of Jews, the Lauræ, or religious colonies of the Eastern and African deserts, the long succession of monastic orders, bands of communists, both men and women, following one another into seclusion from century to century, each in turn coming to repair the failures of those who had gone before, with new vows, new rules, and new professions of devotion to unworldly fellowship;—all these mark the line of undying feeling after some spiritual communion more entirely consistent with the Christian calling than a mere exclusive priesthood, or regulated forms of public teaching, or systematic congregational liturgies, or symbolic celebrations of holy mysteries. The chronicles of Church life are still vocal with many a lesson on the impossibility of keeping up a profession of high purpose while the necessary means of realizing it have fallen into disuse or oblivion. Pages of

evidence are still open to show how churches have gradually lost their power and disposition to carry out their original design, or have even become blind to that design itself, just as their members have ceased to cultivate the spirit of holy fellowship, and have allowed its old forms of practice to fall out of use. Nor are we without melancholy memorials of organizations left in pompous decay, void at heart of the life and spirit which had passed away amidst the activities of growing zeal for outside modes and forms. The free and healthy circulation of spiritual life in the Christian body is indeed shown to be the great secret of a successful and happy fulfilment of its life-task.

These testimonies of history accord with the experience of Christians. The many contrivances by which attempts are made to meet calls for something more close and social than can be afforded by public religious services or sacramental institutions, indicate the reality of that ever-living spiritual instinct which looks for sympathy from kindred souls, and craves a part in the mutual care, watchfulness, and help by which that sympathy is properly expressed. Spiritually-minded people feel that, as members of Christ's mystical body, their vital union with each other should be the same in nature as their union with the Lord. This presses upon them as a spiritual necessity, that without which Christ's body as a whole cannot perform its proper functions. What are called "fellowship-meetings," "Bible-classes," "catechetical examinations," select "meetings for religious conversation," and "associations for special prayer or intercession," are all acknowledged as important parts of modern church work. This acknowledgment, however, is simply the outspoken experience of the churches as to the necessity of keeping themselves in inward as well as outward readiness for doing their Master's will. Indeed every right-hearted Christian feels that the great work in which *he is called to take his part* requires him to enjoy the

deepest sympathy with his Redeemer, and the closest fellowship of heart and hand with his fellow-workers. The necessities of his renewed nature urge him to long for the full blessedness of his belief in the "Holy Catholic Church," and the full joy of knowing that the "communion of saints" is as spiritual a reality as "the forgiveness of sins." In fact the Christian experiences of each passing generation prove that the Church confesses its obligation to suit the spirituality of its means to the spirituality of its design; so that its fellowship both in spirit and in action may harmonize with the completion of its work.

Thus right reason advises all who fix on a purpose so high and holy as that of Methodism, to act out fully the principle of combination, and to keep the combination in full force by all the means which are most akin to the spirit and character of the proposed design; while the examples and precepts of God's Word accord with reason as to the necessity of suiting the conditions and relations of the Christian Church to its high calling; so that unity and mutual help may give its agencies their full power. History also testifies that what God requires is acknowledged by His people as necessary to their spiritual life and consistent action; and experience, both personal and collective, gives its voice for a fellowship among Christians, so much like their intercourse with Christ as to harmonize their unity of action with the completeness of their design.

Aided by these suggestions of reason, Scripture, history, and experience, we may enter on the inquiry, how far Methodism has prepared itself for its professed task. What means has it provided for effecting its purpose? are its means suitable to its end? are its positive arrangements so adapted to its design as to be evidently necessary to its success? Its design has been sketched. With their object full before them the first Methodists started in the zealous employment of the ordinary means

prescribed as sufficient by their existing churches. While John Wesley was in Georgia, "My brother and I," said he, "were as vehemently attached to the church as ever, and to every rubric of it ; insomuch that I would never admit a disenter to the Lord's Supper, unless he would be re-baptized. . . . Full of these sentiments, of this zeal for the church, (from which I bless God He has now delivered me,) I returned to England in the beginning of February, 1738. I was now in haste to retire to Oxford, and bury myself in my beloved obscurity ; but I was detained in London week after week. . . . In the meantime, I was continually importuned to preach in one and another church ; and that not only morning, afternoon, and night, on Sunday, but on week days also. As I was lately come from a far country, vast multitudes flocked together ; but in a short time, partly because of those unwieldy crowds, partly because of my unfashionable doctrine, I was excluded from one and another church, and, at length, shut out of all ! Not daring to be silent, after a short struggle between honour and conscience, I made a virtue of necessity, and preached in the middle of Moorfields. Here were thousands upon thousands, abundantly more than any church could contain ; and numbers among them who never went to any church or place of public worship at all." *

Charles Wesley joined his brother in this work. "We had no view therein," says John, "but so far as we were able, (and we knew God could work by whomsoever it pleased Him,) to convince those who would hear what true Christianity was, and to persuade them to embrace it." † "Many of those who heard this began to cry out that we brought 'strange things to their ears ;' that this was doctrine which they never heard before, or at least never regarded. They searched the Scriptures, whether these things were

* J. Wesley's Works, vol. vii., pp. 422, 423.

† Ibid., vol. viii., pp. 248, 249.

so, and acknowledged ‘the truth as it is in Jesus.’ Their hearts also were influenced as well as their understandings, and they determined to follow ‘Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.’

“Immediately they were surrounded with difficulties ;— all the world rose up against them ! neighbours, strangers, acquaintances, relations, friends, began to cry out amain, ‘Be not righteous over much ; why shouldest thou destroy thyself ? Let not much religion make thee mad !’

“One, and another, and another came to us, asking what they should do, being distressed on every side ; as every one strove to weaken, and none to strengthen, their hands in God. We advised them, ‘strengthen you one another ; talk together as often as you can ; and pray earnestly with and for one another, that you may endure to the end and be saved.’”*

Now the calling and purpose of Methodism began to be unfolded more fully to these Methodist evangelists. The thought of raising a “holy people,” that they might “spread Scriptural holiness over the land,” was taking deep root in their hearts and rising into commanding power over the purposes of their life. It was becoming evident that if the fruit of their labours was to be permanent and the work of Scriptural holiness was to be growingly fruitful, and in its results equal to their heart’s desire, other means than were afforded by the ordinary mechanism of the Church must be promptly and carefully organized. The rise and growth of these convictions in the soul of Wesley may be clearly traced, while listening to the public expression of his most serious thoughts. “The question is,” says he to a cavilling Bishop, “whether a due and regular attendance on the public offices of religion does not produce the love of God and man. I answer, Sometimes it does ; and sometimes it does not. I myself

* J. Wesley’s Works, vol. viii., p. 249.

thus attended them for many years, and yet am conscious to myself that during that whole time I had no more of the love of God than a stone. And I know many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of serious persons, who are ready to testify the same thing. . . . For some years I attended these public offices, because I would not be punished for non-attendance. And many of these attended them because their parents did before them, or because they would not lose their character; many more, because they confounded the means with the end, and fancied this *opus operatum* would bring them to heaven. How many thousands are now under this strong delusion! ”*

A little host of preachers soon arose around the Wesleys, and united with them in their first Conferences. “Mr. Venn and Mr. Romaine began to be spoken of; and not long after Mr. Madan and Mr. Berridge, with a few other clergymen, who, although they had no connection with each other, yet preaching salvation by faith, and endeavouring to live accordingly, to be Bible Christians, were soon included in the general name of Methodists.”†

The Head of the Church “gave the word, and great was the company of the preachers.” A succession of burning and shining lights was sent into the thick darkness of ungodly multitudes, that by them “the preaching might be fully known, and that all the Gentiles might hear.” All who heard and received the truth were exhorted to avail themselves of the established ordinances of the Church, and were far the most diligent attendants both at prayers and sacrament. But it was placed beyond a doubt, at length, that mere preaching up and down among the people would have no lasting effect without some mode of gathering and preserving the fruits of the

* J. Wesley’s Works, vol. viii., pp. 61, 62.

† Ibid., vol. viii., p. 350.

ever-widening harvest. "Mr. Romaine," says Wesley, "has been an instrument of awakening several here (at Hartlepool); but for want of help they soon slept again." * This was an exemplar case. Longer experience and wider observation led to stronger conviction that some plan of training the associated converts must be adopted. "I was more convinced than ever," says the first Methodist Preacher, when on a visit to Wales, "that the preaching like an Apostle without joining together those that are awakened, and training them up in the ways of God, is only begetting children for the murderer. How much preaching has there been for these twenty years all over Pembrokeshire! But no regular Societies, no discipline; no order or connection; and the consequence is, that nine in ten of the once-awakened are now faster asleep than ever." † Discipline was needed as well as preaching. Wesley had learnt this from the recorded experience of the primitive Christians; and what his learning had done to direct his judgment was rendered more effective by the impressive facts which now came under his notice. "It was," he tells us, "a common saying among the Christians in the primitive Church, 'The soul and the body make a man; the spirit and discipline make a Christian'; implying, that none could be real Christians without the help of Christian discipline. But if this be so, is it any wonder that we find so few Christians; for where is Christian discipline? In what part of England (to go no farther) is Christian discipline added to Christian doctrine? Now, whatever doctrine is preached, where there is not discipline, it cannot have its full effect upon the hearers." ‡ In accordance with the principle and example of the primitive Church, a plan of discipline was eventually completed and put in force to meet the necessity which grew more and

* J. Wesley's Works, vol. ii., p. 415.

† *Ibid.*, vol. iii., p. 144.

‡ *Ibid.*, vol. vii., p. 285.

more apparent as the number of inquirers and converts pressed around the successful Methodist Preachers. This plan was not framed in its completeness from the first, but shaped itself to the minds of its framers as unfolding circumstances disclosed the successive demands of the case. An authorized record says of the originators of the Methodist Rules, "As they had not the least expectation, at first, of anything like what has since followed, so they had no previous design or plan at all ; but everything arose just as the occasion offered. They saw or felt some impending or pressing evil, or some good end necessary to be pursued. And many times they fell unawares on the very thing which secured the good or removed the evil. At other times, they consulted on the most probable means, following only common sense and Scripture : though they generally found, in looking back, something in Christian antiquity likewise very nearly parallel thereto." *

The Class-Meeting forms the ground-work of the entire plan of discipline. And it is interesting and instructive to see how the whole Methodist system formed itself around this primitive institution. Clearly to see the essential importance of this element in the foundation of the Methodist organization, its early history should be carefully reviewed,—its introduction, its early testings, its first fruits, and the speedy manifestation of its value and necessity as the means of effecting the original purpose of Methodism. The author of the "Plain Account of the People called Methodists," says, that those religious inquirers whom he had advised to meet together to strengthen one another in their pursuits, came to him and said, "'We want you likewise to talk with us often, to direct and quicken us in our way, to give us the advices which you well know we need, and to pray with us as well as for us.' I asked, Which of you desire this ? Let

* *J. Wesley's Works*, vol. viii., p. 248.

me know your names and places of abode. They did so. But I soon found they were too many for me to talk with severally so often as they wanted it. So I told them, 'If you will all of you come together every Thursday, in the evening, I will gladly spend some time with you in prayer, and give you the best advice I can.'

"Thus arose, without any previous design on either side, what was afterwards called *A Society*. . . .

"They now likewise agreed, that as many of them as had an opportunity would meet together every Friday, and spend the dinner hour in crying to God, both for each other and for all mankind.

"It quickly appeared, that their thus uniting together answered the end proposed therein. In a few months, the far greater part of those who had begun to 'fear God, and work righteousness,' but were not united together, grew faint in their minds, and fell back into what they were before. Meanwhile the far greater part of those who were thus united together continued 'striving to enter in at the strait gate,' and to 'lay hold on eternal life.'

"Upon reflection, I could not but observe, this is the very thing which was from the beginning of Christianity. In the earliest times, those whom God had sent forth 'preached the Gospel to every creature.' And the *οἱ ἀκροταῖ*, 'the body of hearers,' were mostly either Jews or Heathens. But as soon as any of these were so convinced of the truth as to forsake sin and seek the gospel salvation, they immediately joined them together, took an account of their names, advised them to watch over each other, and met these *κατηχουμένοι*, 'catechumens' (as they were then called) apart from the great congregation, that they might instruct, rebuke, exhort, and pray with them, and for them, according to their several necessities." *

* *J. Wesley's Works*, vol. viii., pp. 250, 251.

This return of the first Methodists to the primitive rule of Christian fellowship or communion was, in fact, one mode of carrying out what was believed "to be God's design in raising up the Preachers called Methodists,—to reform the nation, particularly the Church." This attempt at scriptural reform would necessarily be called in question and opposed by a church which made no provision for the spiritual fellowship of believers, and had seemingly no means of acting out its own creed by arranging for a "communion of saints." The Methodists were charged with making a "schism," "gathering churches out of churches," "dividing Christians from Christians," and "destroying the Christian fellowship of Parishes." The great Methodist apologist answered, "That which never existed; cannot be destroyed. But the fellowship you speak of never existed. Therefore it cannot be destroyed. Which of those true Christians had any such fellowship with these? Who watched over them in love? Who marked their growth in grace? Who advised and exhorted them from time to time? Who prayed with them and for them as they had need? This, and this alone, is Christian fellowship: but, alas! where is it to be found? Look east or west, north or south; name what parish you please. Is this Christian fellowship there? Rather, are not the bulk of the parishioners a mere rope of sand? What Christian connection is there between them? What intercourse in spiritual things? What watching over each other's souls? What bearing of one another's burdens? What a mere jest is it then to talk so gravely of destroying what never was! The real truth is just the reverse of this; we introduce Christian fellowship where it was utterly destroyed. And the fruits of it have been peace, joy, love, and zeal for every good word and work."* The Wesleys soon found,

* *J. Wesley's Works*, vol. viii., pp. 251, 252.

however, that the weekly task of affording spiritual guidance to the multitudes who sought for counsel was too heavy even for their strength. They must have "helps." "We groaned under these inconveniences long," says John Wesley, "before a remedy could be found. The people were scattered so wide, that I could not easily see what the behaviour of each person in his own neighbourhood was; so that several disorderly walkers did much hurt before I was apprised of it. At length, while we were thinking of quite another thing, we struck upon a method for which we have cause to bless God ever since."* A Methodist of Bristol suggested a weekly subscription towards the expenses of the work, and offered to take charge of a limited number of the Society, and collect from each a penny every week. The plan was adopted. Leaders were appointed. In the course of their financial work a case of religious inconsistency was discovered. This awakened a fruitful thought. "It struck me immediately," says Wesley, always watching for lessons on the means of accomplishing his purpose, "It struck me immediately, 'this is the thing, the very thing we have wanted so long.' I called together all the Leaders of the classes, (so we used to term them and their companies,) and desired, that each would make a particular inquiry into the behaviour of those whom he saw weekly. They did so. Many disorderly walkers were detected. Some turned from the evil of their ways. Some were put away from us. Many saw it with fear, and rejoiced unto God with reverence. . . .

"The Leaders at first visited each person at his own house; but this was soon found not so expedient. And that on many accounts. . . . Upon several considerations it was agreed, that those of each class should meet all together. And by this means a more full inquiry was made into the

* *J. Wesley's Works*, vol. viii., p. 252.

behaviour of every person. Those who could not be visited at home, or no otherwise than in company, had the same advantage with others. Advice or reproof was given as need required, quarrels made up, misunderstandings removed; and after an hour or two spent in this labour of love, they concluded with prayer and thanksgiving.

"It can scarce be conceived what advantages have been reaped from this little prudential regulation. Many now happily experience that Christian fellowship of which they had not so much as an idea before. They began to 'bear one another's burdens,' and naturally to 'care for each other.' As they had daily a more intimate acquaintance with, so they had a more endeared affection for each other: and '*speaking the truth in love, they grew up into Him in all things, Who is the Head, even Christ; from Whom the whole body, fitly joined together, and compacted by that which every joint supplied, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, increased unto the edifying itself in love.*'" *

From the beginning, then, the Class-Meeting has formed a distinctive feature of Methodist social life. It was, from the first, the prime action from which all other actions in the machinery began; that, in close or more remote dependence on which alone everything in the system performed its functions with certain and happy effect. The code of Methodism is built up from this institution. The rules of the Society are made to sustain it. Every outstanding institution is linked to it. All the agencies take a character from it. It rules the spiritual culture of souls. It is at the base of all financial arrangements. It is, in short, essential to the integrity, consistency, working order, and existence of the Methodist Connexion. The place which the Wesleys gave to the Class-Meeting in their

* *J. Wesley's Works*, vol. viii., pp. 252—254.

authorized body of "General Rules of the United Societies" shows their conviction that with it the "United Societies" would stand or fall.

"The 'United Society' is no other than 'a company of men having the form and seeking the power of godliness, united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation.' That it may the more easily be discerned, whether they are indeed working out their own salvation, each Society is divided into smaller companies, called *Classes*, according to their respective places of abode. There are about twelve persons in every class, one of whom is styled *the Leader*. It is his business (1.) To see each person in his class once a week at least, in order to inquire how their souls prosper; to advise, reprove, comfort, or exhort, as occasion may require; to receive what they are willing to give toward the relief of the poor. (2.) To meet the Minister and the Stewards of the Society once a week, in order to inform the Minister of any that are sick, or of any that walk disorderly, and will not be reproved; to pay to the Stewards what they have received of their several classes in the week preceding; and to show their account of what each person has contributed.

"There is one only condition previously required in those who desire admission into these Societies,—'*a desire to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins.*' But wherever this is really fixed in the soul, it will be shown by its fruits. It is therefore expected of all who continue therein, that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation, First, by doing no harm, by avoiding evil in every kind, especially that which is most generally practised. . . . Secondly, by doing good, by being, in every kind, merciful after their power; as they have opportunity, *doing good of every possible sort, and, as*

far as possible, to all men. . . . Thirdly, by attending upon all the ordinances of God. . . . These are the General Rules of our Societies. . . . If there be any among us who observe them not, who habitually break any of them, let it be made known unto them who watch over that soul as they that must give an account. We will admonish him of the error of his ways ; we will bear with him for a season ; but then if he repent not, he hath no more place among us. We have delivered our own souls." * :

These rules set forth the nature and design of Methodism, and fix the essential principles and necessary parts of its organization. To mutilate these rules, to alter them, or disarrange their mutual relations, would be to break up the system. Methodism ceases to be when either its design be forgotten, or its foundational discipline be ignored. According to these indispensable rules, those details of pastoral work which it is beyond the power of an itinerant ministry satisfactorily to perform, are to be entrusted to the Leaders, and are therefore not to be effectively done without a faithful attention to the class. That kind and amount of pastoral work which may be reasonably expected from those who have the ministerial oversight, must be done in accordance with the weekly reports of the Leaders when they meet the ministers and show their class-books. The spirit and practice of the Scriptural duty of weekly contributions in support of the Gospel, are to be kept up at the class ; so that the financial ability of the system hangs on the observance of the rule. The Stewards who transact the financial business of the Society, and to whom ministers and the poor look for their support must be members of the Society, and diligent attendants at the class. Visitors of the sick, and teachers of the young, must be chosen from among members of the classes. Trustees of Connexional property must as members of

* *J. Wesley's Works*, vol. viii., pp. 269—271.

the Society be amenable for consistency not only to their fellow Trustees, but to the Leaders assembled weekly to consider affairs of discipline. Every candidate for the ministry must come duly accredited from the ranks of Local Preachers ; and no man can become a Local Preacher or continue in his office unless, as a member of some class, he gives good proof that he experimentally enjoys the doctrine of salvation which he is to preach. Every charge against any member of the Society is to be heard at a meeting of Class-Leaders ; and no sentence can be given against any unless those Leaders pronounce him guilty. No mere attendance on preaching, no mere observance of sacramental forms, gives a right to the privileges of the Society ; but a quarterly token of membership received from the Minister at the quarterly visitation of the classes, commands access to all the religious ordinances of the body. Looking then at the mere machinery of Methodism in the light of its own indispensable rules, it cannot fulfil its design without its Class-Meetings. It cannot exist without them. Class-Meetings are not to be dispensed with without a violation of its essential plan of discipline ; and in the violation of that essential plan Methodism, as such, ceases to be.

The Methodist Society had become so far conformed to the New Testament model of a Christian Church as to have a Scriptural right to fix its own conditions of membership, and to make the weekly fellowship of its members an indispensable rule.

The primitive Christian Society or Church was formed on the principle of religious distinction. Christ designed it to be so. This is clear from His own teaching. So, in His addresses to His disciples, who then formed the nucleus of His Church, He said, "Ye are the light of the world, let your light shine." "Ye are the salt of the earth." Salt figuratively represents an inward power and virtue ;

while light has reference to public expression and testimony. Christ's disciples, then, form a community which is "the light of the world," giving out saving truth by its testimony or in its ministrations ; while its members are "the salt" of mankind ; like salt, preserving the world from corruption, and decay, and inspiring it with new life.

Again, the Saviour likens His Church, in its working and growth, to the springing and development of a "mustard seed," and to the operation of "leaven" in "meal." He recognized in the little circle which gathered around Him, the germ of a community which was savingly to influence all nations ; and by diffusing its spiritual life and power, to regenerate a fallen world. His parables agree in teaching that the power by which the Church develops itself is that of saving truth which lives in its heart ; and that the spiritual life which works in the souls of its members is gradually to overcome the carnality without, and to transform the universal mind of man. The leading idea of these parables, indeed, is at the farthest remove from the notion of a mere formal organization, or lifeless ecclesiastical body, united on the principle of expediency ; or that of a trained hierarchy kept up merely by civil or ecclesiastical statutes, and designed chiefly to preserve its own entireness or to complete its own discipline and forms of action.

The Lord's parables rather suppose the Church to exist for the purpose of diffusing the truth which it loves, and sustaining and giving out the spiritual life which it enjoys ; so as to accomplish the final purpose of the Saviour's incarnation and sacrifice, the salvation of the world from sin and death. The Divine lessons cannot, indeed, be understood but on the supposition that the Church is founded on the principle of religious distinction. It is presumed that hypocrites may, for a time, be hid in its bosom, for men are not "heart knowers ;" and that appearances may

sometimes, "deceive" even "the elect;" but those who are known as ungodly are not to be admitted, or suffered to remain in it. Neither its constitution nor its design would allow this. This view is to be held the more sacred, as there are ceaseless efforts to break down this barrier and widen the limits of the Church so as to accommodate it to circumstances, or to fit it to the loose notions of undecided men.

The leaders in these efforts, like a modern interpreter of the parables, earnestly warn us against making parables the seats of doctrine; but with equal earnestness try to bring out the doctrine of an open and religiously undistinguishable Church from the parable of "the tares." Their difficulty, however, is with our Lord's plain expression, "the field," in which the tares are mingled with the wheat, "is the world," not the Church, but "the world." Nor have they met the difficulty by saying, "the term 'world' need not perplex us in the least—it was the world, and therefore was rightly called so, until the seed was sown in it; but thenceforth it was the world no longer;" that is, in plain terms, as they would seem to have it, "the field is the world," and the world is "the Church." No, that would be in direct opposition to the principle and design of our Lord's teaching. Nor, with the design of the Church before us, can we read the letters of the Apostles to the Societies or Churches which they had founded, without coming to the conclusion that an essential of those Societies' constitution was the genuine consecration of their members to Christ. Hence the expressions applied to them, "chosen out of the world;" "sanctified in Christ Jesus;" once, "the children of wrath, even as others," but now, "washed, sanctified, justified," "quickened;" once "dead in trespasses and sins," but now, "elect, the chosen of God;" "holy brethren;" "partakers of the heavenly calling;" a "royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people," called to "show forth the

praises of Him who hath called them out of darkness into His marvellous light."* "Of the sacred character of the Christian Society," says an eminent bishop,† "considered as the temple of the Holy Ghost, and the appointed medium of His operations, it is scarcely possible to speak in language too strong. No peculiarity of the New Testament is more striking than the continued and anxious endeavour of the sacred writers to awaken and cherish a sense of it."

When the Holy Ghost had fully opened to the Apostles the meaning of their Master's lessons, they were one in sustaining them. So, St. John says that the great design of Christ's manifestation was, "that He might destroy the works of the devil;"‡ or, in other words, save the world from sin. St. Paul has the same design before him when he teaches that, "it pleased the Father that in Him should all fulness dwell;" that "having made peace through the blood of His cross," He might, "by Him, reconcile all things unto Himself, . . . whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven." "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself."§ The design of Christ's coming is still the design of His Church. He is "the Head over all things to the Church,"|| and what He purposes His members are called to effect; for we are "workers together with Him . . . and all things are of God, Who hath reconciled us unto Himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; to wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech

* 1 Corinthians i. 2; Ephesians ii. 3; 1 Corinthians vi. 11; Ephesians ii. 1; Hebrews iii. 1; 1 Peter ii. 9.

† Hinds. ‡ 1 John iii. 8.

§ Colossians i. 19, 20; 2 Corinthians v. 19.

// Ephesians i. 22.

men by us ; we pray in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God." Let us not then, he continues, and he speaks now to the Church, "receive the grace of God in vain, . . . giving no offence," lest the ministry, or service, "be blamed ; but in all things approving ourselves as the "deacons or servants "of God, . . . by pureness, by knowledge, by long-suffering, by kindness, by the Holy Ghost, by love unfeigned, by the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armour of righteousness on the right hand and on the left ;" and "Thanks be unto God, who always causeth us to triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest the savour of His knowledge by us in every place. For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish : to the one we are the savour of death unto death ; and to the other the savour of life unto life." *

It was understood that within the Church there would be different degrees of Christian attainment, and various shades of Christian character ; while the door was open to every sincere seeker of that grace which the Church enjoyed and recommended ; for as Christ opened Himself to all who came out from the world, and denied themselves, and, taking up their cross, followed their Saviour, His Church still cries, "Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely." A sincere "desire to flee from the wrath to come," is a sufficient qualification for admission into communion with those who are united for the purpose of guiding all who come to their Lord and Master.

It has already been shown that Methodism, from the beginning, shaped itself on the principle of the primitive Church, the principle of religious distinction ; and that it entered on its course of action in the same spirit and the same purpose as distinguished the first Christian Society. Now Methodism and the early Christian Societies being alike in principle and spirit and purpose, are necessarily

* *2 Corinthians v. 18—20 ; vi. 1—7 ; ii. 14.*

alike in their duties. The first duty of the Apostolic Society was to preserve their own spiritual life, enjoyment, and power. Such is the duty of Methodism. But this duty supposes a right, the right of adopting, maintaining, and enforcing all the means that, in the light of God's expressed will, appear necessary to the preservation of distinctive purity and vigour. The first Christian Churches claimed and exercised such a right; and such a right properly belongs to Methodism, akin as it is to primitive Churches in principle, spirit, and design.

The Apostolic community had within itself Divinely constituted authorities, by whom all that was needful to its continued holiness was rightfully enforced. No Society can exist without some rules, and without some means of enforcing obedience to those rules; and the very institution of the Society, the Church, implies the design that rules should be established and means provided for securing their observance. In its complete constitution the Church took all the essential features of a community;—fixed terms of membership, principles and rules for self-government, and duly appointed officers for the proper administration of Christian discipline. This community was a Divine institution: Divinely originated, Divinely organized, with laws and officers Divinely ordained. Indeed Church government is of Divine origin. Neither the Redeemer nor His Apostles marked out and imposed on every Church an elaborated system of ecclesiastical discipline, exclusive in its authority and universal in its obligations; or prescribed an entire form of worship from which no congregation is ever at liberty to deviate; but in their teaching and practice, they laid down the great principles which are to guide the Church in adapting its regulations to existing circumstances. These principles were to be preserved in all ecclesiastical arrangements down to the end of time. In *the first place* there is *spirituality*. The objects, functions,

and connections of the Church must ever be distinct and separate from the world. Then there is *universality*. The requisitions of the Church must never render it impossible for men of any race, or clime, or circumstances, to avail themselves of its blessings. And at the same time there must be *unity*; which will allow every member, without respect of persons, to realize the highest spiritual privileges of Christianity. Though in some Christian Churches there may be *some* departure from the pattern of the primitive community in the details of their frame-work, the recognition and maintenance of these Divinely authorized principles by any Christian Society so far conforms that Society to the Apostolic standard as to secure for it the power of keeping up within itself its own godly discipline; and the right of enforcing such conditions of membership as prove most consistent with its principles, and most effective in promoting its design.

It is not saying too much to assert that Methodism was founded on the great principles in question, spirituality, universality, and unity; and that as a Christian Society it took all the essential characteristics of a New Testament Church. Like the primitive Societies, its distinct object was the spiritual welfare of its members in order to the preservation and propagation of the Christian faith. It formed New Testament rules of belief and conduct for its people. It gave birth to teachers, pastors, and governors, equal to the guardianship and administration of its discipline and the edification of its members; and it provided for the observance of those Sacramental institutions which were ordained by the Great Head of the Church. Its likeness to the primitive models is acknowledged by all who have fairly known it; and its claims as a Church have been adequately sustained by the character and fruit of its action. Thus far conformed to the teaching and examples of the New Testament, like the Apostolic communities, it

32 *Class-Meetings in Relation to Methodism.*

had the power of maintaining its own spiritual life and order ; and, like them, has held the awarded right of claiming from all who unite themselves to it the faithful observance of its established rules. As a Christian community it has ever had a right to settle its own terms of membership in the way which it has seen most consistent with its first principles and its supreme design. The Class-Meeting is its distinctive mode of Christian communion, the test of its member's qualification for all its privileged ordinances and means of grace. And if as a Church it was founded on the principle that "the communion of saints" is to be enjoyed by its people as a spiritual reality ; or if, as a means of mutual edification, the Class-Meeting from the first took an essential place in the ground-work of its system of spiritual culture, it has been from the first its duty to hold that meeting sacred as a means of grace, and what is its duty is, in fact, its Scriptural right. If the rule of weekly fellowship in the Class-Meeting accords with sound reason ; if its claims are asserted by the voice of history ; if the experience of holy generations testifies to the happy results of its observance ; if, after a fair trial, the Methodists have proved it to be happily consistent with their most cherished principles and to be most effective as a means of working out the design of their life as a body ; and if, above all, the Class-Meeting as a mode of Christian fellowship, evidently accords with Scriptural precept and example, and with the inspired records of the primitive Church teaching and practice ; then Methodism as a Christian community, or Church, remains bound to preserve its Class-Meeting rule as a sacred test, and must hold the Scriptural right of making the continued observance of that rule indispensable to membership.

CHAPTER II.

Class-Meetings in their Relation to the World.

THE question is not whether there may be a church without Class-Meetings, but whether Methodism can answer its design without them. It is not, whether it is impossible to loosen or remove the obligation of the Class-Meeting, so that Methodists may fall into conformity with other churches, but whether Class-Meetings are really necessary to the prosperity of Methodism. There may be a church without Class-Meetings, if the Church of England Article correctly defines a church as "a congregation of faithful men in the which the pure Word of God is preached, and the sacraments be duly administered according to Christ's ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same;" but the main design of such a church would be to preserve its creed, to keep up its corporate privileges, to provide a succession of preachers, and to perpetuate its priesthood, altar, ritual, and sacramental services. The design of Methodism, however, as its founder shows, is not to erect itself into a "new sect," or to build itself into a complete church fabric ; but rather to "reform the nation, particularly the church ; and to spread Scriptural holiness over the land," and through the world. Its arrangements for the accomplishment of this purpose show that the Class-Meeting is inseparably wrought up into the ground-work of its plan ; and, as we have seen, is necessary to the integrity of the system. Is the Class-Meeting, then, so adapted to the design of the Society as to be necessary to its continued prosperity ? It might not be impossible to loosen or remove the obligation of the *Class-Meeting* ; for it is possible to

dissolve the whole system, and reconstruct it in another shape, and with another design ; but can the present acknowledged design of Methodism be fulfilled without its classes ? Are they essential to its life and success ?

If those who formed the Methodist plan believed that “God had thrust them out to raise a holy people,” and, in forming their plan, holiness was their “point ;” if their work was entered upon and carried out in the full and hearty belief that God’s design in raising up Methodist Preachers was “to spread Scriptural holiness over the land ;” then, the prosperity of Methodism must always be in proportion to the healthiness and power of its spiritual life. Scriptural holiness is the business of Methodism, its one calling, its only work. Whatever, therefore, after fair, full and faithful trial, has been proved to be the most certain and effective means of fulfilling its task, becomes a Methodist duty, and is necessary to faithfulness in Methodist work and to the reality of Methodist success. Those who first proposed holiness as their aim, were careful to define it so that those who follow them cannot mistake their object. They did not, by a “holy people” mean mere harmless folk. “How many,” says Wesley, “take holiness and harmlessness to mean one and the same thing ! whereas, were a man as harmless as a post he might be as far from holiness as heaven from earth.”* Nor was it supposed that holiness consisted in “any outward thing ; such as *forms* or *ceremonies*, even of the most excellent kind. Supposing these to be ever so decent and significant, ever so expressive of inward things ; supposing them ever so helpful, not only to the vulgar, whose thought reaches little farther than their sight ; but even to men of understanding, men of stronger capacities, as doubtless they may sometimes be : yea, supposing them, as in the case of the Jews, to be appointed by God Himself ; yet, even

* *J. Wesley’s Works*, vol. vii., p. 316.

during the period of time wherein that appointment remains in force, true religion does not principally consist therein ; nay, strictly speaking, not at all.”* All these outward observances, including sacramental forms, and attendance on preaching, and liturgic exercises, as is well known to every spiritually-minded observer, it is possible to practise in beautiful church order, without break or flaw, while there is not the least genuine evidence of spiritual life and power. There may be some happy exceptions amidst multitudes of formalists. Indeed, there may be reason for joy over many who sincerely strive after the mind of Christ, while attached to ecclesiastical systems which provide neither test of spiritual health, nor adequate means of helping sincere candidates for a clear enjoyment of Scriptural holiness. But it must be painfully acknowledged as the highest probability, that the fruit of formal attachment to such defective church organizations will, for the most part, be a fond persuasion that *as touching the law, I am blameless.*

In aiming at Scriptural holiness, Methodism sees something more, too, than mere orthodox notions. “ We believe indeed,” says Wesley, “ that ‘ all Scripture is given by inspiration of God,’ and herein we are distinguished from Jews, Turks, and Infidels. We believe the written Word of God to be the only and sufficient rule both of Christian faith and practice ; and herein we are fundamentally distinguished from those of the Romish Church. We believe Christ to be the Eternal, Supreme God ; and herein we are distinguished from the Socinians and Arians. But as to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think.”† “ Religion does not consist in orthodoxy, or right opinions. . . . A man may be orthodox in every point ; he may not only espouse right opinions,

* J. Wesley’s Works, vol. v., p. 77.

† *Ibid*, vol. viii., p. 340.

but zealously defend them against all opposers. . . . He may be almost as orthodox as the devil . . . and may all the while be as great a stranger as he to the religion of the heart.”*

The churches which sustain themselves on the principle of a mere doctrinal test, or an initiatory confession of devout attachment either to more general principles, or more particular evangelical dogmas, show, in their experience or history, or fruits, the inevitable difficulty of preserving anything like distinctiveness of Christian character, and indeed of a general culture among them of deep and pure spiritual life. Even the comparatively few exceptions among their professed members, who, in spite of the tendency of their system keep a high standard of religious enjoyment and practice before them, owe their success in this largely to their private opportunities of spiritual intercourse with kindred souls. The holiness which the Wesleys and their followers made it their work to pursue and spread was that for which St. Paul prayed on behalf of the Thessalonians. “And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”† This apostolic prayer supposes that in purifying the hearts of Christian believers and in giving them full rest in Christ, God glorifies Himself as “the God of peace;” or, that the loveliness of the Divine character is most fully manifested on earth in the work of entire Christian holiness. Because, while that work fully removes from the soul those evils which necessarily hinder man from being perfectly happy, it so regulates and enriches the soul by the indwelling of the Holy Ghost as to prepare it for the most reasonable and happy action, that of *rejoicing evermore, praying without ceasing, in*

* J. Wesley's Works, vol. v., p. 78.

† 1 Thessalonians v. 23.

everything giving thanks; and gives such a bias to the whole man as ensures the growing and permanent happiness of all who are within the range of its influence; in that it brings the Christian into the habit of unreservedly presenting himself a “living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God,” and hallowed to the salvation of men.

The apostolic prayer supposes, moreover, that “the God of peace” provides for the continuous and final preservation in entire holiness of the Christian’s triune nature, the invariable regulation of his intellect, the uninterrupted communion of his spirit with God, and the habitual sanctification of his body, as the temple of the Holy Ghost. And the Apostle prays for all this in faith; faith in the perpetual efficacy of the Redeemer’s blood, in the unceasing freeness of the Spirit’s influence, and in the ever-living virtue of the Divine promise. This doctrine of experimental holiness has been taken as distinctive of Methodism, under the term “Christian perfection;” in accordance with an earnestly and repeatedly-expressed desire for the Corinthian believers, “and this also we wish, even your perfection;” your perfect restoration to harmony as a church as the result of your individual purity and mature conformity to Christ. This perfection as believed in by the Methodists is not absolute perfection, that belongs to God only, but Christian perfection—full salvation from sin. It is not such a perfection as places the Christian beyond the possibility of mistake, or misunderstanding, or misjudgment, or forgetfulness, or any mere infirmity of our mortal nature which may bring trials after it, though not necessarily involving condemnation; but it is perfect sincerity, guilelessness of soul, after the example of him whom the Heart Searcher called “an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile.” No guile as to God, always willing to be open to His view: no guile as to our neighbour, a conscious freedom from all evil, in thought, word, or deed, towards him: no guile as to self, no latent

wish to think of oneself other than God thinks. This perfection is not one which renders the atonement no longer necessary, as if the soul had once for all received the full advantage of the cleansing blood ; but it is rather the perfection of faith in the perpetual efficacy of the atonement ; a habit of repose upon it ; an ever " coming " to Christ as " to the living stone ;" a " living and believing ;" so as to realize the apostolic experience, " I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me : and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, Who loved me, and gave Himself for me ;" and thus singing from a pure heart

" Every moment, Lord, I have
The merit of Thy death."

The Methodist view of perfection is not that it admits of no farther advance in the knowledge and enjoyment of God, or that it places the Christian beyond the touch of temptation or the possibility of yielding to it ; but that it is simply " perfect love," removing all hindrances to a deepening acquaintance and communion with God, and casting out all " slavish fear " " that hath torment." That it is not a perfection that promotes spiritual pride and disposes the soul to say to its neighbour, " Stand by, for I am holier than thou ;" but a perfect humility, that never *thinks of itself more highly than it ought to think*, nor ever fails to give God the glory of all it is and all it has. It is not a perfection which raises the man above the sympathies and feelings proper to humanity, so that he becomes superior to all that belongs to the ordinary relations of human life ; but so perfect a resignation to God's will that all the Christian's sympathies and passions are so refined and regulated as to prepare him most fully for a calm, faithful, and happy fulfilment of all his human relationships. Nor is Christian perfection, in the Methodist sense, that which

disqualifies and indisposes the man who enjoys it for the activities and duties of his worldly calling ; but so perfect a heavenliness of spirit and temper as renders him most fit to pass through the labours and sufferings of his pilgrimage with becoming earnestness, diligence, cheerfulness, and rectitude ; exemplifying the holy influence of genuine hope, “every man that hath this hope in Him purifieth himself, even as He is pure.”

This doctrine of holiness, and the experience and spread of it were taken as distinguishing characteristics of Methodism. “This doctrine,” says Mr. Wesley, “is the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists ; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly He appeared to have raised us up.”* Not that as a New Testament doctrine it had never been taught or enjoyed during the course of the Christian Church until Wesley appeared ; but, perhaps, it had never been so clearly defined, never so fully set forth in its proper importance, never so earnestly enforced, since the age of the Apostles, as now it was. With the Methodist Preachers, it was to be the leading theme. With the people it was to be the secret of all spiritual prosperity. In answer to the question, “What can be done in order to revive the work of God ?” one of the primitive Conferences answered, “Strongly and explicitly exhort all believers to ‘go on to perfection.’ That we may ‘all speak the same thing,’ I ask once for all, Shall we defend this perfection, or give it up ? You all agree to defend it, meaning thereby (as we did from the beginning) salvation from all sin, by the love of God and man filling our heart. The Papists say, ‘This cannot be attained, till we have been refined by the fire of purgatory.’ The Calvinists say, ‘Nay, it will be attained as soon as the soul and body part.’ The old

* *J. Wesley's Works*, vol. xiii., p. 9.

Methodists say, ‘It may be attained before we die ; a moment after is too late.’ Is it so or not ? You are all agreed, we may be saved from all sin before death. The substance then is settled ; but as to the circumstance, Is the change gradual or instantaneous ? It is both the one and the other. From the moment we are justified, there may be a gradual sanctification, a growing in grace, a daily advance in the knowledge and love of God. And if sin cease before death, there must in the nature of the thing, be an instantaneous change ; there must be a last moment wherein it does exist, and a first moment wherein it does not. ‘But should we in preaching insist both on one and the other ?’ Certainly we must insist on the gradual change ; and that earnestly and continually. And are there not reasons why we should insist on the instantaneous also ? If there be such a blessed change before death, should we not encourage all believers to expect it ? And the rather because constant experience shows, the more earnestly they expect this the more swiftly and steadily does the gradual work of God go on in their soul ; the more watchful they are against all sin, the more careful to grow in grace, the more zealous of good works, and the more punctual in their attendance on all the ordinances of God.”*

To keep this standard of “Scriptural holiness” constantly before preachers and people, Wesley issued his “Plain Account of Christian Perfection.” He saw, however, that the purpose of Methodism as to the spread of so holy a religion required more than mere preaching and writing. There must be discipline for both preachers and people. His plan of discipline for his “Assistants and Preachers,” and his rules, such as “The Rules of a Helper,” were evidently designed as, at once, tests of ability and

* J. Wesley’s Works, vol. viii., pp. 328, 329.

character, and aids to holiness, while the "General Rules of the United Societies" were for the use of Leaders and the guidance of their members in their pursuit of inward holiness and the daily regulation of their holy practice. He adapted his means to his end. For with whatever amount of success an individual Christian may, under some circumstances, urge his way toward the New Testament standard of sanctification, guided and taught by the Spirit of holiness, no entire community can be kept to so high a pursuit without suitable discipline; regulated means of exercising mutual sympathy; well-ordered opportunities of mutual oversight, intercourse, and help. Nor can growing multitudes be held together as a holy brotherhood working together for the one purpose of assimilating surrounding masses to their own spiritual character and mode of life, unless they enjoy the full advantage of seasonably instructing, stimulating, and encouraging one another by outspoken experiences and social prayer. The necessity for all this is the more pressing from the ceaseless propensity of our fallen nature to form a low standard of religion for itself; to shrink from disclosing its own inner conflicts with the Spirit or its own feelings after God, under the plea of their being things too sacred for expression; and to shut itself up against the searchings of truth and the light of any reflections of its own character from the unfolded experience of others. This unsocial propensity in religious things is stronger in some than in others; but it is sufficiently strong in all to prevent sustained combination in the pursuit of holiness, and associated effort to spread it, without the corrective and stimulating aid of true brotherly fellowship. A Society whose business is holiness will prove the necessity of such internal discipline to strengthen it for its work, and to keep up the spirit of its calling against the influence and *action of a hostile world.*

St. Paul warns Timothy against the hostile powers of human evil, which would array themselves against him as well as against the faithful flock of Christ. "In the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, truce-breakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, traitors, heady, high-minded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof. . . . Now as Jannes and Jambres," the jesters and jugglers, "withstood Moses, so do these also resist the truth: men of corrupt minds, reprobate concerning the faith." You have followed the course of my persecutions from this unholy world, you must not expect to escape; "Yea, all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution."*

He might be describing the world of hostility which pressed around the early Methodists. If ever there was a banded society of men "willing to live godly in Christ," yea, with their wills fixed, their holy purpose determinately formed, to live for God alone, God in Christ,—the first Methodists were such; and they accordingly suffered persecution from without. Indeed, so must all who faithfully follow in their godly design. The world remains the same in spirit, in taste, character, and pursuit. And though it may change its modes of attack, it will show in some way, and at some time or other, its enmity to high spiritual life, and its hostility to those who unite in the design of being holy themselves, that they may persuade their fellow-creatures to be holy. "The communion of saints" is divinely appointed for them as a means of strengthening one another's hands and heart against the evil influence and action of the world which is opposed to their sacred mission.

* 2 Timothy iii. 1—5, 8, 12.

They are to find refuge in one another's company, and to realize support in the comforts of holy companionship, and community of spiritual labour and blessing. How strikingly does an apostle distinguish from the outside world, those who give themselves to holiness as children of light, called out of the darkness ! And how impressively does he show that their fellowship must be kept up to preserve that distinction, that their relation to the enemies of light requires, on their part, the closer regard to one another's welfare, and the more diligent care to "build up themselves in their most holy faith, praying" together "in the Holy Ghost," and "looking," as partakers of the same hope, "for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life."* In short, that their unconformity to the world will be so practically resented by the world as to make their privilege of Christian intercourse more precious, to render it, indeed, a pressing duty, a very necessity of their spiritual nature and calling. "Ye brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief. Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day : we are not of the night nor of darkness. For they that sleep, sleep in the night; and they that be drunken, are drunken in the night. But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breast-plate of faith and love ; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation. For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ, Who died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him. Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do. And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you ; and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. And be at peace among yourselves. Now we exhort you, brethren, warn

* Jude 20, 21.

them that are unruly, comfort the feeble-minded, support the weak, be patient toward all men. See that none render evil for evil unto any man ; but ever follow that which is good, both among yourselves, and to all men. . . I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read unto all the holy brethren."** St. Paul might be encouraging the classes of a Methodist Society amidst the oppositions of an unholy world, and giving his charge to the members as to their duty to each other and their due regard to the Leaders who were over them, and laboured for them, and admonished them ; the faithful men who worked for the faithful ; the Aquilas ; and the diligent women, the Priscillas, the Tryphenas, and Tryphosas, who like the beloved Persis, spared no toil in training candidates for holiness.

A beautiful illustrative example of Christian obedience to the happy necessity for seeking the joys of sympathy among a spiritual kindred is given in the history of the infant church. Peter and John had been charged by the persecuting council to cease their teaching both in private and public, and were dismissed under malicious threatenings. " And being let go, they went to their own company, and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said unto them. And when they heard that, they lifted up their voice to God with one accord, and said, Lord, Thou art God, which hast made heaven and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is : Who by the mouth of Thy servant David hast said, Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things ? The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against His Christ. For of a truth against Thy Holy Child Jesus, whom Thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel,

* 1 Thessalonians v. 4, 5, 7—15, 27.

were gathered together, for to do whatsoever Thy hand and Thy counsel determined before to be done. And now, Lord, behold their threatenings : and grant unto Thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak Thy word, by stretching forth Thy hand to heal ; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of Thy Holy Child Jesus. And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together : and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness. And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul. . . . And great grace was upon them all.” *

Both the tribulation and the triumph of these genuine Christians led to their more hallowed communion, and more marked distinction from the world. When persecution had deprived them for a time of their Apostolic guides, they fled together for purposes of devotion, and their prayerful fellowship was the more endearing when the Apostles were released and the truth prevailed. They ran at once, not to the world, with open and boastful proclamation of their success, but “*to their own !*” Where should they go, but “*to their own*”—their kindred, their own “household of faith,” their Lord’s home, and theirs ! This is beautiful ! Hand grasped hand ; eye answered to eye ; heart responded to heart. The story of trial and deliverance was told. Each and all shared in the joy. Each and all were edified. And in holy unanimity they lifted up their voices in praise and prayer. Their bond of union had been tested by the hostility of the world, and the trial had brought them into purer, sweeter, and holier communion. They now more than ever felt the blessedness of “cleaving to the Lord,” and to one another. Their united bent to heaven was strengthened, and the expression of their devout and

* *Acts of the Apostles iv. 23—33.*

brotherly feeling was given in loud harmony. They had been used to chant the psalms, and now, inspired with a new song, they psalmed it, and prayed together as with one heart and voice. This "communion of saints" was pleasing to heaven. A responsive token was given in the shaking of the meeting-place. Their prayer was not for vengeance on their persecutors, but that the saving virtue of their Lord's name might be felt by their foes ; and that they might have grace and power to fulfil the holy purpose for which they had been brought together by the Spirit of Truth and love. The Spirit Himself renewed their joy of fellowship, and great grace or beauty was mutually reflected by the whole consecrated household of enrolled believers. Christ pronounced an extraordinary blessing on a persecuted church ; "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for My sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad : for great is your reward in heaven."* The richest joy of this promise is found in the closer communion of the sufferers, and the reward begins in their mutual enjoyments in the midst of surrounding dangers and sufferings :

" And when the fullest joy is given,
The same delight they prove ;
In earth, in paradise, in heaven,
Their all in all is love."

No privilege, however peculiar to spiritual minds on earth, places them beyond the dangerous neighbourhood of the world. There are temptations distinctive of times when the enmity of the world to spiritual holiness presses hardly upon those who cultivate it. There are suggestions of fear and shame. Insinuations in favour of contempt, presumption, or revenge. The terror of open hostility may now threaten to shake confidence ; and now, the victories of

* St. Matthew v. 11, 12.

faith over the world may endanger humility and meekness. But amidst all these trials from without, the holy brotherhood, like the members of the primitive Societies, have a peaceful refuge in each other's company, and in mutual counsel they may find a balm for their sufferings, a clue to safety, strength for conflict, and encouragement in the prosecution of their design. To fly "to *their own*," is their consolation as well as their duty. The early Christian examples of this divinely authorized union of brotherly discipline and wholesome enjoyment find many answering reflections from the history of Methodism. The world soon showed against the first Methodists its old spirit of aversion to high standards of holy life. But in how many a Class-Meeting, how many a Society gathering have true-hearted and united Methodists found more than enough to hallow their trials, to hush their fears, and to open "a refuge from the storm, a shadow from the heat, when the blast of the terrible ones was as a storm against the wall."*

"You remember, I have no doubt," said a venerable lady a short time ago, "You must remember Mr. Wesley's account of some of his first visits to Bradford in Wiltshire. The coldness and polite unconcern of some, so like the heartless world, and the uproar of what he called 'the beasts of the people,' after the way of god-mongers in Ephesus. Ah! though Bradford was not so bad as some places, there was carnal worldliness enough to try the courage, and faith, and patience of the few holy people who rallied round the first Methodist Preachers. But I have very pleasant recollections of one happy pilgrim's home. It was an inn a little out of the town, the other side of the bridge on the Trowbridge road. It had the sign of the 'Cross Keys.' I see the sign now. It cannot

* *Isaiah xxv. 4.*

be said of some of the first Methodist disciples of the Saviour that there was ‘no room for them in the inn;’ for though ‘not many mighty, not many noble’ opened their doors to them, they often found shelter and welcome in the ‘decent public.’ The ‘Cross Keys’ was kept by a good man called Richard Pearce. He was one of the first Methodists in Bradford. He outlived the first troubles of Methodism, and indeed lived to retire from the ‘Cross Keys’ with the acknowledged character of a consistent, zealous, and large hearted Christian. I shall never forget the little white-washed room behind the bar in his house. That room was set apart for Methodist meetings. There my aunt used to go, and there I have been ; nor was ever a Class-meeting in that room interrupted by anything from outside. Mr. Wesley was always welcomed there ; and there, too, Mr. Romaine used to go. Now I mention it because it was to me a holy place. There it was that the despised and persecuted few used to cheer, or reprove, instruct, or encourage one another. There it was that they helped each other against all that was against them ; and so fully were they assured of God’s smile on their fellowship, that what they knew to be their duty, they delighted in as their chief joy ; and to the diligent pursuit of their calling as Methodists meeting in that room, we owe, I believe, the success and continued prosperity of Methodism in that neighbourhood.”

Illustrations of this most effective mode of cultivating spiritual life amidst the deadly influences of surrounding worldliness, may be drawn from very different scenes in life. The writer once knew a stalwart sailor, the “sail-maker” of one of the old Naval Packet-ships. He was a Methodist Class-Leader, and his class numbered seven or eight of the crew ; soundly converted men, “full of faith and of the Holy Ghost.” While at sea they were exposed to great persecution from officers and ship-mates ;

but they were preserved through all from week to week, as many of them used to tell, by the help secured in their weekly meeting. The time of meeting was, by arrangement, made to suit their duties. Their place of meeting was in the fore-part of the ship, where they were obliged to lie down, either side by side or partly on one another upon the coils of cables ; their position being so ordered as to allow of whispers passing among them, that their voices might not attract attention and lead to the discovery of the meeting. "We were always glad of a gale of wind," said they, "for then the noise of wind and water prevented our voices from being heard, and gave us the comfortable opportunity of hearing one another with ease." This diligent continuance of weekly fellowship alone saved them, and had such results in their consistency and the power of their Christian example, that their value in the ship was acknowledged ; and even their persecuting Commander put them in places of trust and honour.

The spiritual necessity for such means of defence against the world is easily seen. What soul struggling upwards towards holiness is prepared to stand single and unfriended amidst the opposing rush and tumult of carnal multitudes ? A seraph may be

"Faithful found,
Among the faithless, faithful only he."

A Noah might walk with God in a world "filled with violence." A Lot, " vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked ; dwelling among them, and his righteous soul vexed in seeing and hearing their unlawful deeds," must be saved "as by fire." An Elijah, thinking himself to be a lone worshipper of Jehovah, felt unequal to a longer life. A Paul would scarcely be without his Barnabas, or Timothy, or Luke. Luther, Wesley, Whitefield, ready as they were to be martyrs for Christ,

"Dying champions for their God."

never fronted the world single-handed. And when the Blessed Jesus, seeing many of His disciples go back to walk no more with Him, turns plaintively to the twelve and says, "Will ye also go away?" does He look to the faithful few for sympathy while on His way through the world which "knew Him not?" And can His chosen ones follow Him without duly expressed sympathy among themselves? The experience of Methodism in its pursuit of conformity to Him, says, No.

Methodism, however, has lived to find the world changing its style of enmity and opposition. Its senseless, murderous clamours are hushed, its brute force is withdrawn, and even its vulgar laugh is not everywhere to be heard. Its voice now is insinuating, its approach is stealthy, soft, and almost viewless. The influence of its presence is subtle and witching. It affects respectful and even reverent manners. It offers to be friendly; proposes combination for unobjectionable purposes; and is very willing to share in the cultivation of all hitherto debatable and faintly-marked border-lines between itself and Christian society. But its movements, its speech, and its counsels are those of Balaam. Its charms are those of Mammon. Its spirit and manner are those of Antichrist. Its neighbourhood is so close to the Church, and its inroads and partial companionship with professors of religion are become so easy and are permitted as so harmless, that it seems more than possible for all distinctions between truth and error, light and darkness, Christ and Belial, to melt away. There never was such necessity for close communion, distinct association, strongly bound brotherhood, and zealous and diligent fellowship among Christians, as now. Yet, it was never, perhaps, so difficult as now to maintain all these means of defence, so as to keep up a decided pursuit of Scriptural holiness.

Methodism shows proof of what is needed, and bears some *and evidences of the difficulties and dangers of the age.*

The age is one of fierce struggle for self. The desire for money, the love of money, the worship of money moves the spirit of the age. This longing for gold is the root of the very many forms of worldly evil which curse the times and rob the Church of its life and power. The longing for gold as the means of securing position, distinction, and influence, in civil, commercial, social, or even ecclesiastical life, seems to urge the masses into mortal strife. The prevailing principle appears to be practical unbelief in our Lord's decision, "No man can serve two masters. . . . Ye cannot serve God and Mammon." * This practical unbelief has seriously affected the Christian profession. It may still be said of many, they "have forsaken the right way, and are gone astray, following the way of Balaam, the son of Bosor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness." † The ruling spirit of the age carries the crowd into the furious current of fast-driving trade. Unholy competition, questionable trade devices, gambling speculations, and unceasing efforts to make everything pay, absorb the time, the energies, the thought, the very soul of life. Like express modes of modern travel everything rushes on under high pressure. Men cannot rest. They are never quiet long enough at a time to think of anything above the "main chance," as it is called, anything more spiritual or divine than "earth, earth, earth."

Like other churches Methodism gives too many evidences of being caught by the stream, or bewildered by "the power of the air." For a Christian to yield to this *way of the world*, is to prove that the growing difficulty of maintaining his religious life must result at length in spiritual decay and death. Nor will any church find it possible to reconcile conformity to the world with that transformation "by the renewing of the mind," by which alone it can "prove what is that good, and

* St. Matthew vi. 24.

† 2 Peter ii. 15.

acceptable, and perfect, will of God," even its "sanctification."* If the Church is to keep its true character, it must diligently and resolutely use all the means in its power to preserve its inner life in vigorous health. The Methodists cannot look at their professed design, while they feel the pressure of the hostile world, without hearing the testimony of their conscience, that to keep themselves equal to their calling requires more than even the best public services of the Sabbath will afford. They cannot by any possibility preserve the freshness of their piety, the strength of their religious convictions, the stimulating power of their holy consolations, or even the life of their gracious disposition and relish for divine things, without seasonable recurrence to that mutual interchange of brotherly incitement which Divine wisdom has valued so highly as to immortalize in the proverb "Iron sharpeneth iron ; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend."†

A solicitor of marked ability and reputation in the north of England, who was the Leader of a class, a man as distinguished for his spiritual-mindedness and Christian zeal as he was for his diligence in business and integrity and success in his profession, once said to the writer, "I owe more than I can tell to the weekly enjoyment of my class. I entered on public life with a prayerful determination not to be deprived, if I could help it, of that weekly refreshment for my soul ; and, with very few exceptions, my way has been made plain. I have often had to run directly from the office after a whole day's occupation in court ; if, however, I could but secure five minutes before the time to kneel, or sit and select a suitable hymn, I have never found myself unready for the duty of giving, or the privilege of receiving, spiritual blessing. How sweet I

* Romans xii. 2, and 1 Thessalonians iv. 3.

† Proverbs xxvii. 17.

have found it to get away for an hour in the course of a week's exposure to worldly influences, and from dealing with selfish principles and doubtful customs, to enjoy a little holy talk with my fellow-pilgrims in the Master's company! I am sure that without it, I should not have stood my ground. And certain I am, that for those not to use it to whom it is available, is to neglect a duty which is necessary to their spiritual health." The faithful lawyer was right. His heart was in full unison with the heart of the sweet singer from whose hymns he so often chose his inspiriting song for the class,

"Woe to him whose spirits droop,
To him who falls, alone !
He has none to lift him up,
To help his weakness on :
Happier we each other keep ;
We each other's burdens bear ;
Never need our footsteps slip,
Upheld by mutual prayer."

A long and wide acquaintance with the personal history of many who were young Methodists during the earlier life of the writer, has left an impressive recollection of known facts. Multitudes upon multitudes were gathered into the fold, for the most part in times of gracious revival. Two things are still clear. Those who learnt to prepare themselves for Class-Meeting by private heart-searching and prayer in the light of God's word, and who attended the Class as regularly as they returned to their closet, have, almost without exception, left most pleasant and holy memories. While the course of those who began their use of the weekly Class loosely, or fell into a fitful and unpunctual observance of it, have been seen to pass over the border of worldliness, one after another, and to sink into cloudy regions where at last they have shown the sad results of throwing themselves open to the world by

neglecting spiritual culture in regulated fellowship. Their example shows the danger of presuming that we can guard ourselves where an Apostle felt the need of mutual guardianship and called his flock to feel their oneness of danger, "Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into His rest, any of you should seem to come short of it."*

These instances of final semblance of short-coming are the more instructive and significant as they are the few gloomy exceptions to the many bright reminiscences of Methodist faithfulness to essential discipline.

The necessity for the Class-Meeting as a preservative from the world, and an encouragement in the pursuit of holiness amidst hostile influences, is proved by the difficulties which now beset its observance, and by the character of the results which follow its disuse. With all our appliances, our enlarged chapel accommodation, our more strict attention to the arrangement of machinery, our deep array of agencies, our multiplied money resources, and our more widely acknowledged importance in society, we do not hold our own in numbers, nor approach a step towards overtaking the growth of the population around us. What is wrong? Are we showing ourselves more willing to mend our rules than to keep them for conscience' sake? Are our Classes forsaken, not by the poor so much because they cannot pay, but by many of the rich and "bettermost" of our people, whose example of neglect influences for evil not only their own rising families, but the most sincere inquirers in our congregations? Is it true, that the names of the poor neglecters of the weekly meeting are dropped as a matter of course; but that those who can substitute money for their personal presence are still by courtesy called Methodists; and in many cases,

* Hebrews iv. 1.

by further breach of rule, are entrusted with office ? Whatever might be pleaded as a reason or an excuse for such declension from Methodist life and order, might have been pleaded from the beginning ; but was never heard of while there was spiritual life and power enough to make what is a spiritual necessity a weekly joy. The decay of spiritual life is at once the cause and effect of what is deplored. Methodism seems, here and there, to have forgotten her old prayer,

“Never let the world break in ;
Fix a mighty gulf between :
Keep us little and unknown,
Prized and loved by God alone.”

The disuse of the Class, or the mere sham observance of it, follows a loss of “first love ;” a decline of simple, warm, and high spirituality ; and brings in its train the certainty of further spiritual decline. Other mischiefs follow. As the spirit is lost the letter is magnified. As the power ebbs out, the form becomes important. Sunday services are found to be enough. And then one service on that day even suffices ; the morning, perhaps, for one class of hearers, the evening for another. The ritual of the service must be in fine taste. The organ may be allowed to do its work at the expense of the old Methodist singing power. Prayers must be said or sung so as not to break the harmony. Preaching must be limited to a minimum space ; and be moral rather than doctrinal ; quiet, rather than disturbing ; faithful it may be if correct, but correct, if not polished, it must be. These tendencies may be seen rather more in some places than in others ; more generally in town than country ; but wherever they show themselves they evidently gather strength simultaneously with the neglect and disuse of the more spiritual modes by which Methodism is to seek the fulfilment of its holy calling,—weekly

"communion of saints," quarterly fellowship between preachers and people, Lovefeast gatherings, and meetings for social prayer. The creeping coldness towards these primitive institutions, and the growing murmurs against them originate, not in the character of the institutions themselves, nor in the falsity or doubtfulness of their claims as necessary parts of the Methodist plan ; but in the failure of a taste for them on the part of those whose religious tone has ceased to accord with the spiritual work and aim of the Methodist Societies. The manifest tendency away from the original and proper means of Methodism towards the less searching and more showy fashions of the times, began to set in with the encroachments of the world. The real prosperity of the body lessens as the outward tendency gathers strength, and as, amidst the gathering clouds of worldliness, the people lose sight of God's design, once so clearly seen by their fathers. So, the original means of grace, established by the rules of Methodism, will be proved necessary to its great end by the failure of all efforts at prosperity without them. Before such final proof links itself to the long succession of historical warnings, it is hoped that those whose formality untruly bears the Methodist profession, may understand, and feel, and act upon the solemn caution, " Nevertheless, I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works ; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place." *

Another form of worldliness comes sufficiently near to Methodism to show that the most careful modes which it provides for testing its own springs of thought, its rising desires, its turn of affection, and its bent of movement, are ever necessary for the preservation of its purity ; and

* Revelation ii. 4, 5.

must be observed with growing earnestness and constancy if it would consistently hold to its profession. Business and pleasure, by turns, rule the masses of the world. Pleasure, under the name of innocent and necessary recreation, contests the right of supremacy with tyrannizing trade; and has so far intrigued itself into the very counsels of the Church as to render it doubtful whether the claims of pure spiritual enjoyment can much longer be maintained.

Methodism shares the danger. Like many individual men, and many systems that have gone before, it has, perhaps, been enticed so often to "walk in the counsel of the ungodly," that it is in danger of ere long "standing in the way of sinners." If one rule of the Society is broken with impunity, another will be. But Methodists are becoming used to the open violation of one condition of membership, abstinence "from such diversions as cannot be used in the name of the Lord Jesus;" and find themselves, therefore, less disposed to means of Christian communion, and gradually better furnished with plausible excuses for neglect. There is no lack of time for the concert, the evening party, the lecture, the charade, the private dance, perhaps, or the public entertainment; but the meeting for prayer, the public service of God's house, and the weekly class, are unattended for want of an hour. Mere pleasant "entertainments" are even taking the place of devotional service in God's house itself. Both cannot be observed in unison; "for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?"*

But it is asked, Are decent and unexceptionable amusements and recreations to be classed with "unrighteousness" and "darkness?" What harm is there in such social enjoyments? It is difficult, in these times, to answer the question in every case. The evils which draw away Christian souls from the only sources of satisfactory pleasure are so

* 2 Corinthians vi. 14.

disguised, and so agreeably touch the spirit with their subtle poison, that it is only when they are viewed in the full light of the Christian's high calling, the true Methodist's life-business, that the inconsistency and danger of their use become apparent. The question with those who are professed members of a Society for cultivating and spreading Scriptural holiness is not, "How far can I go with the world without doing harm?" or, "Is there any harm in such pleasant forms of recreation as good people around me enjoy?" But it is rather, "Do they promote or do they retard my pursuit of the higher and more becoming delights which I profess to hold supreme? If my soul were satisfied with my God; if to be in His presence and in fellowship with those who most fully bear His image, were the true joy of my heart, would the question ever occur to me, as to what harm there is in the inferior pleasures which other people pursue?" No; the secret of the evil is rather to be found in the lack of spirituality at heart; and it is the loss of this, as the result of laxity in spiritual discipline and the neglect of fellowship with Christ and His people, that proves with solemn impressiveness the necessity of the means by which Methodism proposes to fulfil its holy purpose. To neglect the mutual culture of holy character is to fall away into the vain expedients of an unspiritual world. If Methodism would fulfil its design, it must abide by its rules.

While the pressure of over-heated trade, the overstrained efforts after self threaten to stop the circulation of spiritual life in the very heart of the Church; and while the rage for popular amusement is calling off Christian professors from their true life-task, there are pernicious and bewildering influences, intangible mischiefs, setting in from the region of falsehood and doubt. Men are learning to dispense with creeds. Religious dogmas are getting out of fashion. Settled notions of godliness are becoming

antiquities. Philosophy, so called, is turning divine realities into myths. Science rejects everything but its own discoveries. The atmosphere of life seems to be full of ever dissolving dreams. The latent unbelief of human nature appears to be breaking from its native depths and is threatening to invade the holiest ground and to violate the Christian's dearest retreat. The sceptical, flippant, and irreverent spirit of the age is already affecting the Church. It is giving a doubtful character to the pulpit, and in the pew it begets "nothing but doting about questions and strifes of words."*

Many churches seem to court the evil ; and most of those who would rather check it appear to lack a power of discipline equal to the arrest or banishment of the insidious deceit. The safety of Methodism lies mainly in faithfulness to its plan of godly discipline, as that plan bears on both preachers and people. Nothing is so certain and immovable a defence against the endless devices of the world's unbelief as the conscious enjoyment of saving truth, the inward and outward experimental evidence in the heart and character that the Gospel is "the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth."† The regenerating energy of "the truth as it is in Jesus" holds off and defies all the wily reasonings of proud intellect or vain philosophy. The soundly converted man, the entirely devoted Christian, knows that, "He that hath wrought him for the selfsame thing is God ;"‡ and that the truth which has sanctified him is "the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever."§

St. Paul shows to the Colossians that the truth of Christ enjoyed by them as individual members of the Church, becomes the most powerful defence against the unbelieving spirit of the age when, in their communion as the body of Christ, they give one another the full advantage of each

* 1 Timothy vi. 4. † Romans i. 16. ‡ 2 Corinthians v. 5.

§ 1 Peter i. 23.

other's experience, by mutually expressing their inward spiritual life in Christ. "Though I be absent in the flesh, yet am I with you in the spirit, joying and beholding your order, and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ. As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in Him : rooted and built up in Him, and established in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving. Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. For in Him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in Him who is the Head . . . from which all the body by joints and bands having nourishment ministered, and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God."* Nor is the Apostolic warning without its lesson on the necessity of mutual watchfulness and instruction. "Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. But exhort one another daily, while it is called to-day, lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin."† The weekly means of mutual exhortation which the Class-Meeting affords to the Methodists is the secret of their power against the world of unbelief. Their outspoken experiences of the divine power of truth serve to unite them in the "one faith," as nothing else can ; and the still fresh and happy results of this mutual encouragement and edification in their "most holy faith" are sufficient to prove that a faithful and affectionate continuance in the use of this distinctive rule is necessary to the steadfastness, safety, and life of Methodism.

The devout intercourse between the members of a Class ceaselessly strengthens the bands of their confidence in each other, in the truth which they enjoy together, and in Christ Whose love unites their hearts.

* *Colossians ii. 5—10, 19.*

† *Hebrews iii. 12, 13.*

"Servants of one common Lord,
Sweetly of one heart and mind,
Who can break a threefold cord,
Or part whom God hath join'd ? "

Those who are thus banded for holy purposes, respecting themselves and all around them, have to keep the more compact order and the closer mutual understanding, in that they have to be guarded against more than what is seen and heard. Behind, beneath, and within what is seen and heard of the world, is a ruling spirit, the spirit of the age. "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places." * Those who agree to contend for holiness have to stand not merely against flesh and blood ; not merely against the *κοσμος*, the visible scene of carnal life, nor merely against the "age," the passing times, the prevailing character, habits, and ideas whose "darkness" is seen and even felt ; but against the hidden powers that quicken, control, and direct them. These concealed powers are under a supreme command. For unbelieving human nature walks "according to the age of this world," the times, in their present distinctive character ; "according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience." † This prince, this great spirit, is "the god of" this age, who "hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious Gospel of Christ, Who is the image of God, should shine unto them." ‡ Then, He who commands the invisible "rulers of the darkness of this age," the hidden movers of unholy strife for carnal things, the unseen designers of vain fashions, earthly customs, trifling pursuits ; the promoters of all downward tendencies ;—he who is called by the Allseeing One, "the prince of this world," is, in fact, "the spirit of the age."

* Ephesians vi. 12. † Ephesians ii. 2. ‡ 2 Corinthians iv. 4.

62 *Class-Meetings in their Relation to the World.*

The world's talk about "the spirit of the age" is the confession of its own bondage. Its boasting about "the spirit of the times," seems like a forced acknowledgment of those relations to invisible evil which the truth of Christ alone reveals. The popular excuse therefore for the partial conformity of Methodists to the fashions and ways of the world,—that, "the spirit of the age" requires it, is, in fact, an implicit siding with him of whom their Saviour said, "the prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in Me."* Those who would keep on their Master's side, be "a holy people," and "spread Scriptural holiness over the land," must obey the apostolic injunction, "Be not conformed to this age," knowing who the spirit of it is, "but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God;" and as you "are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another . . . be kindly affectioned one to another, with brotherly love, in honour preferring one another; not sluggish in zeal; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord . . . continuing instant in prayer; sharing your fellow Christian's necessities. . . . Be of the same mind one toward another, not minding high things, but willingly bending to the lowly."† The duty of the Roman Society is the duty of the Methodists. It is by Christian fellowship alone, irrespective of one another's outward circumstances, that the Methodists can maintain a holy distinction from the world. The world is leagued with the powers of darkness against them and their design. They must confront combination with combination. And knowing that close order is essential to their purpose, their safety and success depend on their diligent observance of the order to which their avowed purpose binds them. Let them ignore their rule of spiritual intercourse and mutual guardianship and Methodism will melt into the world, and its mission will end.

* St. John xiv. 30.

† Romans xii. 2—16.

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* Ephesians vi. 12. † Ephesians ii. 2. ‡ 2 Corinthians iv. 4.

He and his preachers strengthened one another against the evil in their periodical conferences ; and the people, Leaders and members, were supplied with the means of mutual edification in successive issues of pamphlets written by himself and John Fletcher, whose saintly character so richly exemplified the holiness which was the Methodist point of aim. The catechetical style of the “several conversations” of the early Methodist Preachers is clear, bold, and keenly pointed :

“ What is the direct antidote to Methodism, the doctrine of holiness ? ”

“ Calvinism : all the devices of satan, for these fifty years, have done far less toward stopping this work of God than that single doctrine. It strikes at the root of salvation from sin previous to glory, putting the matter on quite another issue.”

“ But wherein lie the charms of this doctrine ? What makes men swallow it so greedily ? ”

“ It seems to magnify Christ ; although in reality it supposes Him to have died in vain. For the absolutely elect must have been saved without Him ; and the non-elect cannot be saved by Him.—It is highly pleasing to flesh and blood.”

“ What can be done to guard against it ? ”

“ Let all our preachers carefully read over ours and Mr. Fletcher’s tracts.—Let them frequently and explicitly preach the truth, though not in a controversial way. But let them take care to do it in love and gentleness ; not in bitterness, not returning railing for railing ; let those who preach Calvinism have all this to themselves.—Do not imitate them in screaming, allegorizing, boasting ; rather mildly expose these things when time serves.—Imitate them in this : they readily seize upon any one that is newly convinced or converted. Be diligent to prevent them and to guard those tender minds against the pre-

destinarian poison. . . . Very frequently, both in public and private, advise our people not to hear them. Make it matter of constant and earnest prayer that God would stop the plague." *

Those who were thus careful for one another as teachers of holiness, and so faithfully acted out the principle of fellowship and mutual training among themselves ; were ever watchful over their flocks, and lost no opportunity of exhorting and persuading them to the use of all means of growth in Christian intelligence and love ; and the unwavering and constant observance of that holy fellowship which would most effectually hold them secure against surrounding dangers. In his remarkable essay on "Christian Perfection," intended as a guide and help to the Methodists in working out their holy design, Wesley says, "It is to guard them who are saved from sin, from every occasion of stumbling, that I give the following advices.

"But first I shall speak plainly concerning the work itself. I esteem this late work to be of God ; probably the greatest now upon earth. Yet, like all others, this also is mixed with much human frailty. . . . Many are hindered from seeking faith and holiness by the false zeal of others ; and some who at first began to run well are turned out of the way. What are the advices ? Watch and pray continually against pride. . . . Beware of that danger of pride, enthusiasm. . . . Beware of antinomianism ; enthusiasm naturally leads to this ; indeed they can scarce be separated. This may steal upon you in a thousand forms, so that you cannot be too watchful against it. Take heed of everything, whether in principle or practice, which has any tendency thereto. . . . Beware of sins of omission, lose no opportunity of doing good in any kind. Be zealous of good works ; willingly omit no work, either of piety or mercy. . . . Beware of desiring anything

* J. Wesley's Works, vol. viii., pp. 336, 337.

but God. . . . Beware of schism, of making a rent in the Church of Christ. That inward disunion, the members ceasing to have a reciprocal love 'one for another,' (1 Cor. xii. 25,) is the very root of all contention, and every outward separation. . . . If you would avoid schism, observe every rule of the Society and of the Bands, for conscience' sake. Never omit meeting your Class or Band; never absent yourself from any public meeting. These are the very sinews of our Society; and whatever weakens, or tends to weaken, our regard for these, or our exactness in attending them, strikes at the very root of our community. As one saith, 'That part of our economy, the private weekly meetings for prayer, examination, and particular exhortation, has been the greatest means of deepening and confirming every blessing that was received by the word preached, and of diffusing it to others, who could not attend the public ministry; whereas without this religious connection and intercourse, the most ardent attempts by mere preaching have proved of no lasting use.'''*

The dangers to early Methodism were not merely doctrinal. It had to strengthen itself against other Church hindrances to its prosperity. The more open, rude and unprincipled opposition to its work came from the mere formalists of the Church. And such was the character of this opposition that the deep joy of the Methodists' fellowship with Christ and with one another alone could keep them from the danger of what seemed to be a systematized effort to stamp out their religious life and overthrow their gracious design. Their spiritual system alone could withstand the system of their foes. Nothing but their close discipline, their shoulder to shoulder style of encouraging each other could enable them to maintain their ground and inspirit them for a successful advance.

* J. Wesley's Works, vol. xi., pp. 427—433.

"It pleased God," says the record of these trials, "by two or three ministers of the Church of England, to call many sinners to repentance ; who in several parts were undeniably turned from a course of sin to a course of holiness. The ministers of the places where this was done ought to have received those ministers with open arms ; and to have taken them who had just begun to serve God into their peculiar care ; watching over them in tender love, lest they should fall back into the snare of the devil. Instead of this, the greater part spoke of those ministers as if the devil, not God, had sent them. Some repelled them from the Lord's table ; others stirred up the people against them, representing them, even in their public discourses, as fellows not fit to live ; Papists, heretics, traitors ; conspirators against their king and country.

"And how did they watch over the sinners lately reformed ? Even as a leopard watcheth over his prey. They drove some of them also from the Lord's table ; to which till now they had no desire to approach. They preached all manner of evil concerning them, openly cursing them in the name of the Lord. They turned many out of their work ; persuaded others to do so too, and harassed them all manner of ways. The event was, that some were wearied out, and so turned back to their vomit again. And then these good Pastors gloried over them, and endeavoured to shake others by their example.

"When the ministers by whom God had helped them before came again to those places, great part of their work was to begin again (if it could be begun again) ; but the relapsers were often so hardened in sin, that no impression could be made upon them. What could they do in a case of so extreme necessity, where many souls lay at stake ? No clergyman would assist at all. The expedient that remained was, to find some one among themselves who was upright of heart, and of sound judgment in the

things of God ; and to desire him to meet the rest as often as he could, in order to confirm them, as he was able, in the ways of God, either by reading to them, or by prayer, or by exhortation. God immediately gave a blessing hereto. In several places by means of these plain men, not only those who had already begun to run well were hindered from drawing back to perdition, but other sinners also, from time to time, were converted from the error of their ways.

" This plain account of the whole proceeding I take to be the best defence of it. I know no Scripture which forbids making use of such help, in a case of such necessity. And I praise God who has given even this help to those poor sheep, when ' their own shepherds pitied them not.' " *

This original mode of defence against the faithless formalism of the Church continued to be a necessity to the Methodists. As their numbers increased and their pursuit of holiness became more intense ; as the purpose of their union became more and more apparent, and their zeal made itself more widely felt ; as their profession became more distinct and bold, and the success of their work reflected reproof more clearly and strikingly upon the " blind leaders of the blind," the hostile watchfulness of a disturbed clergy and their irritated flocks became more lively and general, rendering mutual guardianship, godly discipline, and prayerful fellowship more and more necessary to Methodist consistency and power. The number of Wesley's " plain men," as Leaders, had to be increased ; their labours abounded as a matter of course ; and their classes were under deepening obligation to consider their calling and use their weekly privileges as imperative duties. Wesley saw the indispensable character of the rules prescribed. And he earnestly presses the observance of the Society's

* J. Wesley's Works, vol. viii. pp. 223, 224.

discipline, as of essential importance in the preservation of their purity and the fulfilment of their calling. He shows how that which marked them as objects of ecclesiastical attack was the true secret of their strength. Their spiritual unity and communion made them

“Mighty their envious foes to move,
A proverb of reproach—and love.”

“Consider,” says he, “with deep and frequent attention, the peculiar circumstances wherein you stand. One of these is, that you are a new people ; your name is new, (at least as used in a religious sense,) not heard of till a few years ago, either in our own or in any other nation. Your principles are new, in this respect, that there is no other set of people among us, (and, possibly, not in the Christian world,) who hold them all in the same degree and connection ; who so strenuously and continually insist on the absolute necessity of universal holiness both in heart and life ; of a peaceful, joyous love of God ; of a supernatural evidence of things not seen ; of an inward witness that we are the children of God ; and of the inspiration of the Holy Ghost in order to any good thought or word or work. And perhaps there is no other set of people, (at least, not visibly united together,) who lay so much and yet no more stress than you do on rectitude of opinions, on outward modes of worship, and the use of those ordinances which you acknowledge to be of God. . . . On those outward modes of worship, wherein you have been bred up, you lay so much stress as highly to approve them ; but not so much as to lessen your love to those who conscientiously dissent from you herein. You likewise lay so much stress on the use of those ordinances which you believe to be of God, as to confess there is no salvation for you if you wilfully neglect them ; and yet you do not judge them that are otherwise

minded. . . . *Do not imagine you can avoid giving offence.* Your very name renders this impossible. . . . And as much offence as you give by your name, you will give still more by your principles. . . . What makes even your principles more offensive is, this uniting of yourselves together: because this union renders you more conspicuous, placing you more in the eye of men. . . . Go on, I would earnestly advise you, ‘keep in the very path wherein you now tread. Be true to your principles.’ Never rest again in the dead formality of religion. Pursue with your might inward and outward holiness. . . . Be true also to your principles touching opinions and the externals of religion. Use every ordinance which you believe is of God; but beware of narrowness of spirit towards those who use them not. Conform yourself to those modes of worship which you approve; yet love as brethren those who cannot conform.”*

The distinctive mode of keeping up the unity to which the “United Societies” are thus exhorted with such earnestness and authority; the conspicuous faithfulness to Methodist principles, and the marked regularity of obedience to the order of weekly private meetings and public prayer, which were enforced with such tenderness and warmth; could not be persevered in long without awakening questions about the true relation in which the Societies stood to the Church of England. Were they still of the Church? They professed to be, and for a time, they were sincerely loath to think themselves otherwise. Their position, however, necessarily became more and more doubtful. Their Class-Meetings now fully organized, and their rule of discipline now fixed; and these being now laid down as the main and indispensable means by which the design of their union was to be worked out; could

* *J. Wesley's Works*, vol. viii., pp. 353—357.

they retain their place as members of a Church which acknowledged no such organization, included no such separate law of discipline, and whose constitution was not framed for working towards such an end as Methodism proposed ? Queries would arise. They did sometimes press themselves on Methodist thought ; and, by and by, they found some expression in one of the "Several Conversations" of Methodist Preachers assembled with the Wesleys in Conference. One question follows another, and the answers are given thus :—

" How far is it our duty to obey the Bishops ? "

" In all things indifferent. And on this ground of obeying them, we should observe the Canons, so far as we can with a safe conscience."

" Do we separate from the Church ? "

" We conceive not : we hold communion therewith for conscience' sake, by constantly attending both the word preached and the sacraments administered therein."

" What then do they mean who say, ' You separate from the Church ? ' "

" We cannot certainly tell. Perhaps they have no determinate meaning ; unless by the Church they mean themselves ; that is, that part of the clergy who accuse us of preaching false doctrine. And it is sure we do herein separate from them, by maintaining that which they deny."

" Do you not entail a schism on the Church ? That is, Is it not probable that your hearers, after your death, will be scattered into all sects and parties ; or that they will form themselves into a distinct sect ? "

" We are persuaded that the body of our hearers will even after our death remain in the Church, unless they be thrust out. We believe notwithstanding, either that they will be thrust out, or that they will leaven the whole Church. We do, and will do, all we can to prevent those

consequences which are supposed likely to happen after our death. But we cannot with a good conscience neglect the present opportunity of saving souls while we live, for fear of consequences which may possibly or probably happen after we are dead." *

With all that Wesley did or could do to prevent what he saw would "probably happen," the Methodists were "thrust out" of the Church; but their rule of discipline was not abandoned, nor was the holy purpose of their unity given up. The necessity for the Class-Meeting had not ceased; it became more imperative. The continued life and prosperity of Methodism required it. It was essential to its very existence. It was, and is still, what Wesley declared it to be from the beginning, one of "the very sinews of our Society;" "whatever weakens or tends to weaken our regard for these (Classes or Bands), or our exactness in attending them, strikes at the very root of our community." It was to be by the use of these means that the Methodists were "to leaven the whole Church," had they not been "thrust out;" and by these alone are they to preserve the leaven among themselves, so as still to act savingly on the Church which thrust them out, and prosper in their design of leavening the world with truth and holiness. They may still believe in God's design in raising them up, and try "to reform the Church;" but they can do it only as a "holy people," giving out the saving influence of their faithful conformity to Methodist rules and the Methodist calling. Thrust out of the Church, but keeping God's design before them, they found themselves constrained, step by step, to take up a position apart from the Church which had shown itself incapable of sympathy with their spirit or their aim. The grace of their fellowship was too precious to lose. Their work and its anticipated

* *J. Wesley's Works*, vol. viii., pp. 280, 281.

fruit were too evidently Divine to be abandoned. Everything necessary to complete their arrangements for an independent prosecution of their sacred calling must now be added. Their places of worship must be their own. Pastors and Teachers must be provided from among themselves to take the general oversight of the souls whom they gathered ; and be set apart and authorized in accordance with New Testament principles and custom, for preaching the word and for the administration of Christian baptism and the Lord's Supper. In short, the outward ordinances which the Church of England denied them, they organized for themselves, as far as seemed essential to the great work upon which their hearts were set. But while Methodism took this external Church-like shape, its internal ordinances and discipline remained as its distinctive means of carrying out its supreme mission. Its regulated religious fellowship was its heart-action. Conformity to the Class or Band Rules and the vigorous maintenance of its mutual training in Scriptural holiness, were, in fact, Methodism proper, Methodism itself. All things else in Christian modes were to be found elsewhere. They had been proved inadequate of themselves to the purpose and work of Methodism ; and though they were now, as ever, devoutly observed by the Methodists, their own distinguishing rules of action alone gave them their name, and are proper to their distinctive design. This Christian fellowship, in living action from week to week, was the secret of their defence against all that was hostile in Church influence while they continued their practical attachment to the Church ; and it will prove their best mode of guarding themselves from all that is mischievous in Church influences now they are in separation. Such influences still threaten to enervate or corrupt their spirit, to interrupt their work or pervert their aim.

The large pretensions of a Church which, though still

too narrow and secular for the spirit and purposes of Methodism, throws itself graciously open to the descendants of those whom it contemptuously cast out, cannot but form an imposing temptation. And to those who in any degree unhappily allow their surroundings to blind them to the high spiritual standard which their fathers set up, and consequently to the value of the simple Scriptural means by which they proposed to attain it ; the promise of their spiritual interests being cared for and secured in an easy and undisturbing manner, by a Church of legal authority and dignified associations, must have an attractive charm.

The growing rage for Ritualistic show, ceremonial pomp, architectural charms, harmony of services and quiet beauty of Church order, has its influence not only in the Church which is the great exemplar of ecclesiastical fashion in England, and on those Churches even who are by descent and profession at the farthest remove from it, but on Methodists and Methodism. The charmed circle is, here and there, approached too nearly. And the danger is lest the eyes of the United Societies be drawn from their heavenly bent to repose upon the mere shadows and patterns which are rising again from the tomb of the past. Methodists may be tempted to copy these Church mechanisms, and even to emulate those who aim at being perfect in symbolic expression. To yield to this temptation is to sacrifice their life. Nor would it be less fatal for them to imitate either the loose or the tight fashion of mere ecclesiasticism among the varieties of Nonconformists. To rival the forms of mere outwork on either side is vain. The real strength of Methodism, both for defence and aggression, is in its inmost organization, and that high tone of spiritual life for which it is adapted and by which alone it is kept in successful action. Amidst all the agitations which have tested its laws and usages, this has been *held sacred*, this has been its untouched rallying point.

From this have always sprung the issues of its renewed strength.

The plan of this inmost organization, including its foundational institution, the Class-Meeting, was framed and adopted as the most effective means of answering God's design respecting the Methodists ; which was "not to form any new sect." Their main purpose was never to be the mere construction of a complete Church system ; as if Church framework were the end of Christian life and effort. If the original object of Methodism be lost sight of amidst rising desires to build itself into something like an equal or a rival to other Churches, it will become a mere "new sect." And if the Class-Meeting with its associated usages were to be sacrificed in order to complete the likeness of the Methodist Church to its neighbour Churches, then, having given up its main object, and those distinctive means of grace in the use of which alone Methodism answered to its name, the question fairly comes, why should it keep separate ? Why not return to the Church from which it sprang, and to the constitution of which it would fain be conformed ? While it retains its distinctive means of grace with the distinctive object for which they were instituted, its peculiar organization can never interlock with the machinery of the Church established by law ; but if its Class-Meetings with all their necessary connections be treated as non-essential, or be allowed to fall into disuse, the way might be open for Methodism to lose itself in the bosom of the Established Church.

The Class-Meeting, with its kindred means, if merely permitted as the usage of the few, but no longer a rule of Church-membership, would die out with the few ; or, the few, remembering that the original design of the "United Societies" was "to reform the Church," would have to work for the reform of their own Church, until they had re-leavened it, or, like their fathers, were thrust out from the place of their

spiritual birth. In such a case Methodism would fail of its original design, and fall into the line of declining sects. "But, beloved, we are persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation."* Methodism may keep her position separate from the Established Church which thrust her out, and still in purity of love, by all the means in her power, carry out her first purpose, and in the true sense of the word, "reform the Church." To do this she must be true to her own principles and plans, and be Methodism still. Methodism may have all that other Churches have of outward ordinances and service, but in the use of its distinctive means, her members must mutually cultivate that spiritual life and power, which, acting like leaven, will assimilate all around to the Methodist doctrine and pattern of Scriptural holiness. The continued action of Methodist influence for good on the Established Church has sometimes been curiously illustrated, and sometimes very happily exemplified.

The years 1836 and 1837 were years of happy religious revival throughout many parishes along the coast of North Cornwall and Devon. The interesting village in which this work of the Blessed Spirit began was for a long time a central scene of spiritual wonders. The little Methodist chapel was continually crowded with anxious people, who, though drawn together at first by the news of things which seemed strange to their ears, flocked, by-and-by, to listen reverently to words of life, words which so many had felt to be "the gospel of their salvation." Not a few of these had been Church-goers all their life : and some, though Church-goers, were marked among their neighbours as open and unblushing breakers of both Divine and human law. These were arrested by the convincing Spirit ; gave proofs of genuine repentance and at length showed practical

* Hebrews vi. 9.

evidence of a new birth. They were gathered into classes ; and though at first they were but raw recruits, requiring tender care, and wise guidance, their character soon proved fruitful, and richly repaid those who faithfully trained them.

Without such means as Methodism afforded in its system of Class-Meetings, the results of this great religious excitement would have been, as in thousands of similar cases, like "the morning cloud, and as the early dew that passeth away." The clergyman of the parish, an aged man, upon whose pasture this spiritual gale had come with such startling effect in his last days, had expressed his wonder that such things should occur under any ministry but his own, and half in doubt and half in anger, inquired how such confidently confessed changes could take place in such people while even he himself never realized the like. When all other modes of expressing his disapproval seemed in vain, he one day gravely said to the Rev. William Hayman, the saintly Methodist Preacher of the Circuit, whom he met in the house of a parishioner, "I am surprised at what I hear, Sir. They tell me that you have received such and such persons into your Society. Do you know the character that they have sustained ? Now, though I seriously differ with you as a people, I did think that you were decent folks, and that you were careful to maintain a respectable reputation. But really I know not what to think when I find you admitting such people among you and willingly allowing yourselves to be disgraced by such companionship. I am surprised !"

"Well, Sir," quietly replied Mr. Hayman, "our Society is a sort of spiritual hospital, open and free for all who are soul-sick, or wounded in spirit, or broken-hearted for sin, or are so diseased at heart as the consequence of their evil practices and habits, that they need advice and care and healing grace. All who come with 'a desire to flee from the wrath to come,' we receive ; and we think we are

acting in the spirit of Him Who ‘came into the world to save sinners.’ You know, Sir, we sometimes sing,

‘He hath open’d a door
To the penitent poor,
And rescued from sin,
And admitted the harlots and publicans in.’

We take all that come, and try to cure them by God’s grace. We receive them on trial for three months ; and, during that time, do our best, by inquiry, exhortation, advice and prayer, to restore them to spiritual health. If we succeed, well : but if not, we send them back to you.”

The retort of the good man was not inapt. Its weekly Class system qualifies Methodism to be a kind of spiritual hospital, such as is found nowhere else. What Wesley said to the Methodists of his time may be said of them still, “With respect, both to your name, principles, and practice, you may be considered as a new people. Another peculiar circumstance of your present situation is, that you are newly united together ; that you are just gathered, or (as it seems) gathering rather, out of all other societies or congregations.”* He did not mean that he and they were living merely to make proselytes. His object was higher ; and so was theirs. Their object was to make the Church holy and to spread holiness in the world, in a purely unselfish and unsectarian spirit and manner, to save themselves and all to whom their influence extended. Methodism opened itself as a sort of spiritual hospital. It was sufficiently free of access to all. It is so still. Its peculiar facilities for the cure of souls bring under its care thousands from its mother Church who desire to “flee from the wrath to come ;” a Church which affords to them no means such as they feel to be necessary to their successful struggle for a clear and happy enjoyment of the Divine favour and image.

* J. Wesley’s Works, vol. viii., p. 354.

The same quiet process of genuine religious assimilation goes on whenever other Churches are influenced by the peculiar modes of Methodist fellowship. To what extent the original purpose of Methodism, to "reform the Church," has been carried on unobservedly notwithstanding the separate positions which have been taken, and the seemingly hostile crossings of feeling and action which have continued to occur, cannot be estimated. The present quickened condition of the Church of England, and its growing spiritual life afford some insight into the successful working of Methodism, and may be found among the ever accumulating fruits of its life and action. Some of the most powerful voices and warmest hearts and most vigorous minds that speak from the pulpits of the Established Church, and give life to her services and health to her theology, she owes to Methodism. Her clerical ranks have been recruited from the Class-Meeting. Her Bishops have been known to imbibe spiritual life in frequent communion with saintly Methodists. Many of the most effective and eminently useful of her living ministers have been taught "the way of the Lord more perfectly," by Methodist Leaders, resident in their parishes, or by poor afflicted, but holy objects of their pastoral care, Methodist members, both men and women. And many a tale could be told of the Parson's conversion under the prayers and advice of the plain but well instructed member of the village Society. And many a cultivated intellect has been hallowed in union with the converted heart which received its new life by means of a faithful Methodist servant. And many such minds and hearts have passed into high circles, spreading holy influences and begetting holy character in spheres of life where the name of Methodist would be either unknown or despised. Methodism, from her schools and her homes, has sent out into English society and into the young families of the nation a succession of teachers, tutors, governesses, and officials,

whose work, example and influence have widened and deepened the currents of religious life, have given a higher and more spiritual tone to the society in which they have moved, and, in fact, without noisily obtruding their doctrine of holiness, have happily served the design of their fathers in "spreading Scriptural holiness in the Church and over the land."

But while the hallowing influence of Methodist example and action has been thus felt in the Church of England, and has been so graciously fruitful, it has been, and still is, felt by other Churches ; and they, too, show forth the results. Nonconforming congregations, in many cases, inherit the advantages of early Methodism, and show in their spirit and life their family relationship to the great revivalists whose ministry called up so many evangelical congregations ; but, for the continuance of their religious vigour and the renewed freshness of their Church action, they are largely indebted to the ceaseless circulation of warm feeling and active zeal among Methodists proper. Their pastors have learnt much, and have had kindlings of heart from the touches of Methodist warmth which have reflected permanent blessing on their flocks ; while no small degree of holy desire for higher Christian life has been diffused among them by the labours and richly exemplified experience of Ministers with whom Methodism has continued occasionally to supply their pulpits.

Now, to what does Methodism owe this success in relation to the Churches of the land ? Doubtless to the grace by which it has kept its high standard of holiness and by which it has consistently pursued its holy purpose. But by what means has this grace been realized ? Not so much by the outward ordinances common to all Churches ; for in these, Methodism has been more than equalled as to completeness and order. Its peculiar internal discipline and institutions have given it its commanding advantage.

Its more private, strict and devout mode of mutual edification and spiritual encouragement—its Class-Meetings—form the secret of its power and influence. They are its home-schools of holy culture. From these private places of spiritual discipline and fellowship in prayer have gone forth the men and women, the preachers, the pastors, the teachers, the holy succession of soundly converted souls and decidedly formed characters, to diffuse the quickening power of Scriptural holiness among various classes of secular and religious society. Its faithfulness to its own principles and rules of close Christian fellowship has preserved its own purity and power. By its devout observance of its primitive discipline it has kept before the Churches a living example of the true “communion of saints.” Its consistent perseverance has been a ceaseless testimony as to the spiritual calling of Christians. And by its banded efforts to keep itself a “holy people,” its peculiar institutions—its distinctive Class-Meetings—have become centres and sources of converting and hallowing agency. Such a fact indicates the duty of Methodism respecting this vital institution. Methodism has proved the Class-Meeting to be a grand secret of its power in relation to other Churches. To give that up is to let its own power dwindle and waste. To lose its power is to lose itself.

CHAPTER IV.

Class-Meetings in their Relation to Preaching and Conversion.

THE spread of Scriptural holiness involves the conversion of sinners. The voice of the prophet to fallen Israel is the voice of the Gospel to the human race ; "Arise, shine ; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people : but the Lord shall arise upon thee, and His glory shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising."* The introduction of the Gospel supposes the fallen and depraved condition of the human race ; "arise !" ye fallen ; "shine !" ye who sit in sinful darkness. The Gospel reveals Jehovah's condescension. It is His voice calling up the fallen. It is the manifestation of Divine mercy, and is, therefore, adapted to none but the sinful. But the Gospel comes to restore man to dignity of condition, and to give light again to his restored soul. It is God's voice to men, "Arise," and "come unto Me !" "Shine," and be like Me ! Arise, and be reconciled to your God, that you may be His honoured children ; and that, as the adopted sons of God, you may "walk in the light as He is in the light ;" having your principles in harmony with His expressed will, your enjoyments attuned to His promises, and your actions conformed to His law. The "light" that is come on the fallen, the "glory of Jehovah" that is risen, is "the true Light, which lighteth every man

* *Isaiah lx. 1—3.*

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that cometh into the world." The prophetic vision of this rising Light was fulfilled when "the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only-begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth ;" * and when in His own manifested person He said to those whom He came to save, "I am the Light of the world."

Fallen men were now to be raised by *looking unto Him*, and by *coming to Him*, for "peace with God." And they were to shine in full restoration to Divine purity and love by receiving from Him the Holy Ghost. That all the fallen might be raised, and that all who sit in darkness may see the Light, He must be proclaimed to all. The proclamation came first from His own lips, when He Himself preached "the word of the kingdom." His preaching showed the way by which fallen and lost man was to be raised to the honours and enjoyments of the kingdom. He preached repentance, and called upon penitent sinners to come to Him for rest ; while He declared the full reception of His own word to be necessary to holiness and eternal life. When about to ascend up where He was before, He made provision for the universal and perpetual proclamation of Himself as the Saviour of men, the Divine Healer of sinful human nature. He had "made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth ;" "by one man sin entered into the world," and "all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." "God so loved the world, that He gave His only-begotten Son," that He "should taste death for every man ;" so that "whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." The glorified Saviour fulfilled His promise to send "another Comforter, . . . the Spirit of Truth," to "convince the world of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment ;" proving that He is "not willing

* St. John i. 14.

that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance," all "be saved, and come unto the knowledge of the truth," through "the grace of God that bringeth salvation . . . to all men ;" and now, that all might know His will, He gave the commission to those whom He had called to proclaim it. " All power," said He, " is given unto Me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and disciple all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost : teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you : and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen." *

The terms of the commission assume the appointment of a succession of preachers whose voices should be heard by " all the world," and " every creature," and continue through all time the proclamation of a Saviour ever present to sanction the heralds and to save those who believe their word. The ultimate design of this Gospel is to bring the world again into holy covenant with God, so that all the Divine grace of the new covenant may be enjoyed and exemplified by the redeemed human race. " For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord ;" (when there is neither Jew nor Greek, but all who are Christ's are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise;) " I will put My laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts : and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people : and they shall not teach every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord : for all shall know Me, from the least to the greatest. For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more." † This entire sanctification of human nature is to follow the pardon of sin and reconciliation with God. " I will imbue their intellect and

* *St. Matthew xxviii. 18—20.*

† *Hebrews viii. 10—12.*

fill their hearts with My law of love and be their God, ‘*for I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more.*’”

The mercy of forbearance and pardon is to be in order to the richer and fuller grace of oneness with Him. Hence the order of the preachers’ commission, “repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.”* In this, the first and model preachers conform to the order which their Lord Himself observed and laid down for all generations of His messengers. “Repent!” is the first cry of the inspired preacher at Pentecost, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.” And the second recorded sermon is to the same effect : “Repent ye therefore, and be converted, in order to the wiping out of your sin; so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.” “Consider your ways ;” and under conviction of your sin against Him Whom ye crucified, “look on Him you pierced and mourn ;” loathe yourselves for your iniquity ; but seek His mercy, and resolve to be His disciples. Prove the sincerity of your feeling and purpose by turning yourselves from your evil ways, and by openly declaring your desire for discipleship. Then make your confession ; receive Him as your Lord and Saviour, and He will wash away your guilt ; and the Holy Ghost will fulfil in you the gracious designs of God’s love. From the presence of your glorified Redeemer will come light and consolation and power, by which you shall be made “partakers of the Divine nature.” The Apostle of the Gentiles was one with his brethren of the circumcision in the order of his theme as a preacher of the Gospel. He “taught publicly, and from house to

* St. Luke xxiv. 47.

house, testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ." * Repentance in order to faith in Christ, and faith in Christ in order to pardon and a change of heart. So, when preaching Christ in the synagogue, he cried, "Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this Man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins : and by Him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses." †

Like the other inspired Preachers who were unitedly the divinely appointed authorities on the doctrines essential to salvation, and on their proper mutual relations, St. Paul preached repentance and pardon in order to the perfect restoration of the converted man to that "righteousness and true holiness" which is "the image of Him that created him." Hence, he prays for those to whom he had testified repentance toward God and faith in Christ, and who, having received the word, had trusted in the Saviour and had received the witness of the Spirit to their adoption. "I ceased not," said he, "after I heard of your faith, . . . to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers; that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him: the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of His calling, and what the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what the exceeding greatness of His power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of His mighty power. . . . For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of Whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might by His Spirit in the

* *Acts of the Apostles* xx. 20, 21. † *Ibid.*, xiii. 38, 39.

inner man ; that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith ; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height ; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God.”*

From all this it is clear that the aim of Apostolic Preachers was entire holiness for themselves and all who received the truth, and that to secure the fulfilment of their holy desires they preached and prayed for the sound conversion of their hearers. They would “present every man perfect in Christ Jesus ;” and therefore they preached Christ, “warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom,” persuading men to repentance and faith that they might be brought into the way of holiness. They might seem to be “beside themselves” in their zeal for this, but “the love of Christ constraineth us,” say they, “and all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to Himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation ; to wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them ; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech by us : we pray you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God.”† The holy purpose of an Apostolic ministry, then, involves the conversion of sinners. True conversion is the first object of New Testament preachers. This was their first aim, the first point in their advance towards a still higher point. They aimed at it as necessary to their higher design. The course of the Church’s holiness was to begin with conversion. The rule of holiness in the world was to be the result of the world’s reconciliation with God.

* Ephesians i. 15—19 ; iii. 14—19.

† 2 Corinthians v. 13, 14, 18—20.

The work of the Methodist Preachers was conformed, as near as might be, to this New Testament order. Raised up, as they believed themselves to be, for the purpose of "spreading Scriptural holiness over the land," their first aim was the conversion of souls. "You have nothing to do," says their rule, "but to save souls. Therefore spend and be spent in this work. And go always, not only to those that want you, but to those that want you most. It is not your business to preach so many times, and to take care of this or that Society, but to save as many souls as you can, to bring as many sinners as you possibly can to repentance, and with all your power to build them up in that holiness without which they cannot see the Lord."*

Some of their half-instructed opposers objected to them that they pretended to realize the miraculous operations of the Spirit in that they prayed for "signs and wonders to be wrought" through their preaching, "in the name of Jesus." "True," says Wesley; "but what signs and wonders? The conversion of sinners; the healing the broken in heart, the turning men 'from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to God.' These, and these only, are the signs and wonders which were mentioned in that prayer. And did I not see these signs and wonders still wrought, I would sooner hew wood, or draw water than preach the Gospel. For those are to me very awful words, which our Lord speaks of Prophets or Teachers: 'Ye shall know them' (whether they are true or false prophets) 'by their fruits. Every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit, is hewn down and cast into the fire.'"*

The Methodist Preachers, therefore, believed that conversion in the Apostolic sense was necessary to Scriptural holiness; and their preaching in its motive, character, and

* J. Wesley's Works, vol. viii., p. 310.

† Ibid, vol. ix., pp. 91, 92.

results, was in accordance with their faith. In this they are distinguished from those who minister on the principle that mere baptism into the Christian faith makes people Christians ; or that to baptize all nations in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, is fully to disciple them ; while their work is clearly distinct from that of all who maintain a Confirmation in the baptismal creed, and a visible confession at the Lord's Supper as a sufficient introduction to a holy life. They saw that the full and permanent success of their great design as to holiness would rest upon the hearty and truly exemplified repentance of their converts, their clear enjoyment of divinely attested pardon, their undoubted spiritual freedom as adopted children of God, and their manifest renewal of heart and life by the grace of the Holy Ghost. Nothing short of this could bring them fairly into the course of holiness. Though as to the outward ordinances of the Church they could say, *all these things have we kept from our youth up*, without a sound conversion they lacked one thing yet. Or, if all their former course was that of reprobates, no reformation could suffice, short of a new birth ; they "must be born again." All must purify their "souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit," being born again by the word of God, before they can, "as new-born babes, desire the sincere milk of the word that they may grow thereby;" * and "*giving all diligence, add to their faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; and to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity,*" which is the bond of perfectness.†

The Methodist plan of preaching was founded on the Scriptural principle that "the Lord hath ordained that

* 1 Peter ii. 2.

† 2 Peter i. 5—7.

they which preach the Gospel should live"—not only "of the Gospel," as of old "they which waited at the altar were partakers with the altar," on the rule that "the labourer is worthy of his reward;" but *according* to the Gospel, so as to exemplify the salvation which they preach ; and, under "the continual dew of Divine blessing, both by their preaching and living, they may set it forth and show it accordingly." The Scriptures recognize the ministers of truth as "the servants of Jesus Christ," "Ambassadors for Christ," "Labourers together with God," "Master builders," "Pastors" "who feed Christ's flock," "Bishops" who have *the oversight* of the "holy people," and "Stewards of the mysteries of God." And nothing can be more impressively shown than the Divine consistency in calling those men into this office whose character fairly answers to their work. Those who are employed to put the Divine impress upon human souls must have the sacred mark upon their own character. They must "be clean, who bear the vessels of the Lord." The preachers of repentance are to know in their own experience what repentance is. The preacher of faith is to be a living believer. The man who invites others to the joys of spiritual birth must himself be born again. He who urges his fellows to the pursuit of holiness must lead in the pursuit. "For we preach not ourselves," said a great exemplar, "but Christ Jesus the Lord ; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ We having the same spirit of faith, according as it is written, I believed, and therefore have I spoken ; we also believe, and therefore speak."* A personal and experimental acquaintance with Christ is necessary to success in

preaching Him or recommending His mercy. It is only when like Andrew, a man has learnt to be at home with Jesus, that he is prepared to find "his brother" and to say, "I have found the Messias," and to say it with such power as to lead his brother to the Saviour.

Without communion with Christ, no man can be swayed by a principle pure, strong, and permanent enough to urge him to the work of an evangelist, or to sustain him in such work. The love of Christ must be that principle. So Jesus Himself shows when he teaches Peter how essential a connection there is between all commanding love for Himself and the work of converting and feeding human souls. "Lovest thou Me ?" If so, then "feed My sheep." So, St. Paul's zeal is founded on enlightened views of Christ's love, while its strength is derived from the ruling power of that love upon his own heart. "The love of Christ constraineth us." New Testament preachers are to kindle their zeal at the same Source, to gather their knowledge from the same Divine Mind, to copy the same example of meekness and patience, and to cultivate Christian courage under the same holy inspiration. All this condemns the popular error that the character of the minister has little or nothing to do with the power of the truth which is ministered. God's truth is unchangeable ; but it does not follow that Christ employs unqualified men to declare it, or that He sanctions an unsaved agency in the work of saving souls. Would any mere human government employ uninformed or rebellious men as its representatives and confidential agents ? And shall Christ send those to promote the dearest interests of His kingdom whose carnal minds are at enmity with God ? Many may pretend to this office, but whatever their connection with the professing church may be, that of education or formal appointment, none can have Divine sanction without an experimental acquaintance with the truth which they

profess to make known. How shall the blind lead the blind ? How can "the natural man" make known the things of God while he "cannot know them ?" No ; under the New Testament as well as the Old, "to the wicked God saith, What hast thou to do to declare My statutes, or that thou shouldest take My covenant in thy mouth ?"

Methodism began by adopting this Scriptural standard of qualification for the ministry, and is so constituted that it stands or falls with it. In one of the early Conferences the question is put,—

"How shall we try those who think they are moved by the Holy Ghost to preach ?"

"Inquire," it is answered, "(1) Do they know God as a pardoning God ? Have they the love of God abiding in them ? Do they desire and seek nothing but God ? Are they holy in all manner of conversation ? (2) Have they gifts (as well as grace) for the work ? Have they (in some tolerable degree) a clear, sound understanding ? Have they a right judgment in the things of God ? Have they a just conception of salvation by faith ? And has God given them any degree of utterance ? Do they speak justly, readily, clearly ? (3) Have they fruit ? Are any truly convinced of sin and converted to God by their preaching ?

"As long as these three marks concur in any one, we believe he is called of God to preach. These we receive as sufficient proof that he is 'moved thereto by the Holy Ghost.'

"What method may we use in receiving a new Helper ?"

"A proper time for doing this is at a Conference after solemn fasting and prayer.

"Every person proposed is then to be present, and each of them may be asked,—Have you faith in Christ ? Are you 'going on to perfection ?' Do you expect to be 'perfected in love' in this life ? Are you groaning after

it ? Are you resolved to devote yourself wholly to God and to His work ? Have you considered the Rules of a Helper ; especially the first, tenth, and twelfth ? Will you keep them for conscience' sake ? Are you determined to employ all your time in the work of God ? ” *

The necessity for truly converted preachers thus lies at the foundation of the Methodist design ; and the necessary mode of securing this essential to its success is in strict conformity to the principle of the Class-Meeting, that of mutual question in order to a correct estimate of each other's spiritual condition. It is the mutual discipline, fellowship and watchfulness, without which it was considered that neither Preachers nor people could be kept in health of soul and holiness of pursuit. The evidences of that spiritual life which were required in candidates for the ministry would first unfold themselves in the weekly communion at the Class. In the Class each candidate would have been spiritually trained for candid and satisfactory responses to the questions of his fathers and brethren in Conference ; and those fathers and brethren themselves would have had all their Christian sympathies and spiritual ability for testing their younger brethren, cultivated and matured in their regulated weekly Christian fellowship. Provision was wisely made for preserving the religious vigour of the Preachers. And in this the same prime importance is given to the Class-Meeting mode of discipline. It is asked,—

“ Do we sufficiently watch over our Helpers ? ”

“ We might consider,” it is replied, “ those that are with us as our pupils ; into whose behaviour and studies we should inquire every day. Should we not frequently ask each, Do you walk closely with God ? Have you now fellowship with the Father and the Son ? At what hour do you rise ? Do you punctually observe the morning and

* *J. Wesley's Works*, vol. viii., pp. 324, 325.

evening hour of retirement ? Do you spend the day in the manner which we advise ? Do you converse seriously, usefully, and closely ? To be more particular, Do you use all the means of grace yourself, and enforce the use of them on all other persons ? They are either Instituted or Prudential.

“The Instituted are,—

“(1) Prayer ; private, family, public. . . . Do you use each of these ? (2) Searching the Scriptures, by reading : constantly, some part of every day ; regularly, all the Bible in order ; carefully, with the notes ; seriously, with prayer before and after ; fruitfully, immediately practising what you learn there ? Meditating : at set times ? by any rule ? Hearing : every morning ? Carefully ; with prayer before, at, and after ; immediately putting in practice ? Have you a New Testament always about you ? (3) The Lord’s Supper : Do you use this at every opportunity ? with solemn prayer before ; with earnest and deliberate self-devotion ? (4) Fasting : How do you fast every Friday ? (5) Christian conference : Are you convinced how important and how difficult it is to ‘order your conversation right ?’ Is it always in ‘grace ? seasoned with salt ?’ Meet to ‘minister grace to the hearers ?’ Do not you converse too long at a time ? Is not an hour commonly enough ? Would it not be well always to have a determinate end in view ; and to pray before and after it ?” *

This close, affectionate, class-like intercourse between the Preachers was evidently kept up as essential to their personal holiness, and, therefore, as necessary to the prosperity of their work. And the history of Methodism would open a succession of facts to sustain the belief that just as the spirit of this ministerial fellowship has been faithfully preserved and acted out, Methodist preaching has been fruitful in the conversion of souls. In a retrospect of forty years, there

* *J. Wesley’s Works*, vol. viii., pp. 322, 323.

are certain holy memories of men who dealt with the writer and others in accordance with Wesley's primitive mode. The hour of the weekly meeting with its conversation, "always with grace," and its prayers, was a time in which every one gathered new life and strength for his work. And those mutual counsels and intercessions were never without responses from above upon the people of every place in the Circuit. The names of the men who thus communed with their junior colleagues, as faithful Leaders with the members of their Classes, will never lose their balmy fragrance. Their names, as the spiritual guides of their "Helpers," will always be associated with successful harvests, harvests of souls brought into the garner of the Church ; and becoming, in their turn, the seed of new and accumulating fruit. The beautiful examples still shine in the distance, in contrast with lifeless routine and technical talk.

"The Spirit in the letter lost,
The substance in the shade."

The need of this regulated mode of mutual edification among the Preachers in order to their proper oversight of the "United Societies," seems to have been constantly pressing on the minds and hearts of Wesley and his "Assistants." Their estimate of such means is seen in the frequent recurrence of earnest questions in their Conferences. They ask,—

"What can be done, in order to a closer union of our Helpers with each other ?" The reply is,—

"(1) Let them be deeply convinced of the want there is of it at present, and the absolute necessity of it. (2) Let them pray for a desire of union. (3) Let them speak freely to each other. (4) When they meet let them never part without prayer. (5) Let them beware how they despise each other's gifts. (6) Let them never speak

slightly of each other, in any kind. (7) Let them defend one another's character in every thing, so far as consists with truth. And (8) Let them labour in honour each to prefer the other before himself." *

These records reveal the depth of early Methodist conviction as to the essential importance of real Christian communion between Preacher and Preacher, and show, indeed, how from the beginning the entire Methodist organization was built up on the principle of that real, practical and regulated fellowship. The fellowship of the Preachers among themselves was the needful qualification for fellowship with the people. Living memory still furnishes beautiful illustrations of conformity to the early rules for securing "a closer union of Helpers with each other." But, alas! there have been times when such illustrations have proved rare. The spot can never be forgotten where, in the course of a walk to a village in which they had to hold an evening service, two "Helpers" stopped and looked at each other for some minutes with deep silent feeling. They had met that day for the first time. One had laboured long at the Antipodes; the other had become hoary in his Master's work in England. Both were saintly men. They had walked for some distance and talked of their past scenes of toil. When the Missionary turned to his venerable companion and said, "Well, brother, come, tell me something about your walk with God. Do you find it sweeter day by day to have fellowship with the Father and the Son?" For a moment, there was no answer but a starting tear and a radiant smile. One brightening face answered the other. Hands were clasped, and then each had caught the spirit of the jubilant challenge which so many of their fathers had given to one another—

* *J. Wesley's Works*, vol. viii., p. 324.

"Come, let us ascend, my companion and friend,
To a taste of the banquet above ;
If thy heart be as mine, if for Jesus it pine,
Come up into the chariot of love."

They walked on, like the men in the path to Emmaus, with their hearts burning within them. At length the one to whom the brotherly question had been put, said to the other, with a voice now tremulous with plaintive and solemn feeling, "I have been many years in the work of the ministry, but you are the first Methodist Preacher that ever put such a question to my heart as you have. You have done me good. And I feel as if, were there more of this freedom with one another, more of this child-like openness on spiritual things, more of this mutual expression of our inner life, after our old spirit and method, there would be more power in our united Ministry, and more rich and large prosperity among us as a people." He was right ; and it may be that those who preach have so often and so long ignored the principle on which their fathers encouraged one another in holy pursuits, that the 'soul-converting power' has not so fully and so continuously attended them ; just as the disuse of genuine Class-Meeting fellowship results in the loss of strong distinctive features of holiness among our members.

Methodist Preachers are called to prepare themselves for their work and keep their posture of readiness for carrying out the design of Methodism, not only by Christian fellowship with one another, but by regulated fellowship with the people. What was enforced by early Conferences as "Prudential means," have been rendered imperative by their proved efficacy as means to the end proposed ; holiness, both of preachers and people.

"Do you use all the means of grace yourself?" is the question to a Helper, "and enforce the use of them on all other persons? . . . Prudential means we may

use, either as common Christians, as Methodists, as Preachers, or as Assistants. (1) As common Christians. What particular rules have you in order to grow in grace ? What arts of holy living ? (2) As Methodists. Do you never miss your Class or Band ? (3) As Preachers. Do you meet every Society ; also the Leaders and Bands, if any ? (4) As Assistants. Have you thoroughly considered your office ; and do you make a conscience of executing every part of it ? ”*

The earnest care with which a diligent observance of these regulations was pressed on the Preachers shows a fixed and full persuasion on the part of those who formed the first Methodist council, that the discipline which had proved so wholesome to the seekers of holiness became the indispensable duty of those who had banded themselves, and covenanted to spend and be spent for the salvation of souls. The weekly class principle and practice had been tested and found most effective as a means of holiness ; and as holiness on the part of those who tried to save men was acknowledged as essential to success, Preachers as well as people were called to be equally faithful in the use of the means. Their fellowship with the people was to be kept up in weekly meetings. By the use of similar ordinances they were to keep abreast of their flocks in the pursuit of all that would promote their united object. Just as Preachers and people shared in the privileges and power of Scriptural holiness would they partake of the joys of spreading salvation. The convincing and converting power of a Ministry will be in proportion to its holiness and the holiness of the Church with which it is combined in labour. Without purity of heart and unreserved consecration to the Divine service, all mere intellectual ability, or learning, or eloquence, or social influence, or

* *J. Wesley's Works*, vol. viii., pp. 322, 323.

personal wealth, are powerless in the conversion of souls. Like the Corinthians, a Church may be "enriched in all utterance and in all knowledge," and "abound in all things, in faith, . . . and in all diligence;" and yet for lack of the "more excellent way" of love which "never faileth," it may be barren of good and seasonable fruit. That for which a Church properly lives, the salvation of souls, requires the full play of hallowed intellect, the purest glow of regulated passion, the happiest testimonies of a peaceful conscience, the clearest discernment of a purified heart, and the utmost power and fixedness of a will resigned to God.

All this supposes the highest culture of spiritual life. Human intellect never comes to its full vigour, most effective exercise, and broadest influence, till the perfect love of Christ rules the heart; never till then are the passions under constant and happy control; nor does the conscience know the depth of Divine peace. Entire holiness alone can engage all the affections in spiritual pursuits, or so harmonize the human with the Divine will as to make the fulfilment of God's loving purposes to men the highest joy of His Church. And while holiness is thus necessary for the work of the world's conversion, that holiness must so distinguish all the agencies of the Church as to give full unity to their action, and living harmony to their influence. In this it must be, as with the pastor, so with the flock; as with the Preacher, so with the people; as with the Leader, so with his class; as with the parent so with the children; as with the teacher, so with the taught. All must "walk by the same rule;" all "mind the same thing." No one must allow himself in the known neglect of any means of spiritual health and power; that in close alliance with his brethren in Christ, he may, "by all means save some" from death, and do his part in hiding "a multitude of sins." However varied the gifts of the Church may be, however different the circumstances of its

members, or the departments of work among its agencies, holiness must be the one soul of the consistent body in working out its mission to the world. How impressively is this shown in the last lessons and deep solemn intercessions of the Saviour while He blessed His disciples with His visible presence ! His sacrificial prayer before He went out to the agony of His cross, like the prayer of the High Priest before the blood-shedding of the atoning victim, was first with respect to Himself, then on behalf of His apostles, and finally for all Israel, and for the world. He had pleaded for His immediate companions ; and then He cries, “Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on Me through their word ; that they all may be one ; as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in Us : that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me. And the glory which Thou gavest Me I have given them ; that they may be one, even as We are one : I in them, and Thou in Me, that they may be made perfect in one ; and that the world may know that Thou hast sent Me, and hast loved them, as Thou hast loved Me.”* “That they may be one,” not only in the faith of Christ, but in the Spirit of Christ, in the nature, ground, and object of their hope ; “one body,” even as they “are called to one hope of” their calling ; one in the Triune Object of their love, trust, obedience, and worship, the “one God and Father,” the “one Lord,” and the “one Spirit :” and one in the uniting influences of which each and all are made partakers, the presence of the Father “of Whom are all things, and we in Him,” the grace of the Son, “the fulness of Him Who filleth all in all,” and “the power of the Holy Ghost,” the one Spirit, by Whom all are “baptized into one body.” “That they all may be one ; as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee ;” that, like Us,

* St. John xvii. 20—23.

their union may be essential to their proper life ; that they may be one in reciprocal affection, one in mutual communication of honour and blessedness, one in spiritual and happy communion, one in their united participation and manifestation of holiness. That this unity in holiness might be realized, He had revealed to His disciples the glory of the Father's character and will, had manifested Himself to their hearts as He did not unto the world, and had given the Holy Ghost that all the glory of saving truth might live in believing souls, and that they might have the grace and glory of being made sons of God and "joint heirs" of glory with Jesus Christ ; "the glory which Thou gavest Me I have given them, that they may be one ;" and that thus one in holy principle and purpose and action, they might bring the world to share with them the joys of salvation ; "that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me."

The oneness of preachers and people in likeness to Christ is necessary to an effective proclamation of the "faithful saying, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." The saying is in itself "worthy of all acceptation ;" but it will be accepted by the world only so far as Christians agree in Christian character, purpose, and effort. The world will learn faith from a faithful Church only. The "truth as it is in Jesus" will convert only as far as it comes from the lips and lives of those who agree in exemplifying its converting power. They must by their spiritual fellowship and unity one with another show themselves to be the body of Christ, in the enjoyment of vital union and communion with the Persons of the Holy Trinity. "That they also may be one in Us ;" in their holy unity representing Christ to men, while Christ represents them above, and represents the Father to them as His chosen people upon earth ; thus securing to them the blessedness of spiritual "fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ," and communion with the Holy Ghost. It is then

only, when their oneness among themselves, as "partakers of the Divine nature," answers consistently with their union with God, that their efforts to save mankind will have their full and final success. For Jesus prays for this sacred unity, that the world may know experimentally and practically that the Father hath sent the Son, and that those who receive Him are loved by God, as the Father loves the Son.

While the Redeemer thus teaches the essential connection between the holy oneness of His people and the conversion of sinners by their means, He significantly shows that this holy union can be realized only by the use among themselves of such means as belong to them exclusively as His friends, and as brethren called out of the world ; and set apart as His embodied "household of faith." To His disciples it was given to know the mysteries of the kingdom ; but they were to be trained in this knowledge apart from those to whom He spoke in parables only. "And when they were alone, He expounded all things to His disciples." They were trained to come to Him "apart," with their questions ; for when He had His deeper lessons to impart, He would say, "Come ye yourselves apart." They were to keep themselves distinct from the world ; and while they could have their richest instruction from Jesus, only as far as they kept themselves in spirit apart from the world ; so they were to preserve their distinctive unity by all the mutual intercourse and spiritual fellowship which belonged to them as separated disciples. They were to strengthen one another as brethren for the work of spreading the Master's kingdom. And as the human body fulfils its functions, and works out the purposes of its life most pleasantly, and with the happiest certainty of result, when there is the full flow of living sympathy between its members, and each and all share in the advantage of *mutual aid* ; so Christ's body, the living Church, is to

maintain its holy life, and prosper in its calling to save the world, by keeping up within itself a ceaseless interchange of spiritual thought and feeling, by preserving the healthy circulation of the common life among its members, and by practically sustaining among its various agencies a felt companionship in labour, in trial and in joy. "For as the body is one," says an Apostle, who had caught the spirit and meaning of his Lord's intercessions and purpose, "as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body; . . . and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many. . . . But God hath tempered the body together, . . . that there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it. Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular. And God hath set some in the Church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues. . . . But covet earnestly the best gifts."*

Let each and all diligently use every means of spiritual culture and mutually prompt one another to the regulated exercise of the gifts which prepare them for their Master's work in the world. "Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; or ministry, let us wait on our ministering: or he that teacheth, on teaching; or he that exhorteth, on exhortation: he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that showeth mercy, with cheerfulness. Let love be

* 1 Corinthians xii. 12—31.

without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil ; cleave to that which is good. Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love ; in honour preferring one another."*

The necessary connection between this internal holiness and unity of the Church, and the salvation of the outer multitudes is beautifully shown in the inspired chronicles of early Christian life. The Apostolic journals, the "Acts of the Apostles," give us authorized types of faithful labour and its proper results. When the first believers had formed themselves into a Society, their enrolled names in Jerusalem being about a hundred and twenty ; and when they were met together with one accord in one place, waiting "*around* the promise of the Father," apart from the world, the Spirit came and gave them power to preach salvation by Christ ; and the seal of their ministration was the conversion of "three thousand souls." While these converted souls continued in faithful fellowship and prayers, "the Lord added to the Church daily such as should be saved."† When the members of the growing Society "were all with one accord in Solomon's Porch," and their distinct sanctity and marked oneness gave them such manifest Divine power, that, of undecided people, "durst no man join himself to them;" yet, "believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women."‡ According to the depth of their purity and the perfection of their fellowship was the measure of their success in preaching. And while the persecuted confessors who were driven from Jerusalem were faithful to their rule of brotherhood, and held together as banded heralds of the cross, "the hand of the Lord was with them : and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord."§

Such significant and typical facts were strikingly repeated

* Romans xii. 6—10.

† Acts of the Apostles ii. 47.

‡ Acts of the Apostles v. 12—14.

§ Ibid. xi. 21.

in the history of the early Methodists. That history is clear and full enough to show that what the Head of the Church has joined together no man can put asunder. The holy oneness of believers in their living communion as members of Christ's body and the conversion of the souls for whom they labour are ever in close relation. The secret of power on the part of Methodism in its aggression on the world has been, from the beginning, its own internal brotherly culture of spiritual life, in obedience to its own tested rules of weekly fellowship. While it has kept these rules "for conscience' sake," the Lord has added to its numbers. But when there has been an evident lack of the "converting power," it has been invariably in association with looseness of internal discipline, and the decay of Class-Meeting life and enjoyment. Methodism still shows that its loss of order in the use of its distinctive means of mutual edification is always answered by a loss of saving power over the outer world. It saves others just as it saves itself; and it saves itself no farther than it diligently uses the means which the Methodist conscience knows to be most effective. Its condition as a converting agency, at any period, has been the condition of its Classes. The proof of the spiritual necessity of the Class-Meeting to Methodism is found in its use. Nothing has made Methodism so good in itself, nothing has made it so great a good to others, as this one vigorous mode of maintaining spiritual power. "Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin."

But as the "true holiness" of the Methodists is necessary to the success of Methodist preaching, and all the aids which the communion of the Class-Meeting affords are necessary to the Methodist standard of holiness, the means which Class-Meetings provide for training Christian converts are necessary also for the preservation of those who are converted by Methodist preaching. It is asked in an early Conference,

"Is it advisable for us to preach in as many places as we can without forming any Societies ?"

"By no means," it is replied ; "we have made the trial in various places ; and that for a considerable time. But all the seed has fallen as by the highway side. There is scarce any fruit remaining."

"Where should we endeavour to preach most ?"

"Where there is the greatest number of quiet and willing hearers. Where there is most fruit." *

The necessity for forming Societies became the greater as the fruit of the preaching increased. The necessity for the Class-Meeting became more and more apparent as the spiritual necessities of the converts pressed upon their "Pastors and Teachers." The necessity grew out of the various conditions and circumstances of the converts ; and in view of the high purpose of Methodism concerning them, the necessity became imperative. The means afforded by the institution of the Class were needed for the instruction of those, who, though blessed with pardon, were, as "babes in Christ," comparatively ignorant. "For after all our preaching," says Mr. Wesley, "many of our people are almost as ignorant as if they had never heard the Gospel. I speak as plain as I can, yet I frequently meet with those who have been my hearers many years, who know not whether Christ be God or man. And how few are there that know the nature of repentance, faith, and holiness ! Most of them have a sort of confidence that God will save them, while the world has their hearts. I have found by experience that one of these has learned more from one hour's close discourse than from ten years' public preaching." † "As the Society increased I found it required still greater care to separate the precious from the vile. In order to this I determined, at least once in three

* J. Wesley's Works, vol. viii., p. 300.

† Ibid., vol. viii., p. 303.

months, to talk with every member myself, and to inquire at their own mouths, as well as of their Leaders and neighbours, whether they grew in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." *

The necessity for such Christian fellowship became still more pressing as its happy results unfolded themselves. "By the blessing of God upon their endeavours to help one another, many found the pearl of great price. Being justified by faith they had 'peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.' These felt a more tender affection than before to those who were partakers of like precious faith, and hence arose such a confidence in each other that they poured out their souls into each other's bosom. Indeed they had great need so to do, for the war was not over, as they had supposed ; but they had still to wrestle both with flesh and blood and with principalities and powers ; so that temptations were on every side, and often temptations of such a kind as they knew not how to speak in a Class; in which persons of every sort, young and old, men and women, met together. These therefore wanted some means of closer union And they were the more desirous of this, when they observed it was the express advice of an inspired writer, 'Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another that ye may be healed.' In compliance with their desire, I divided them into smaller companies, putting the married or single men, and married or single women, together." †

Thus the "Bands" were originated ; each smaller company or Band being under a Leader. These were to be periodically met by Mr. Wesley, or his "Assistants." As these means of mutual aid and encouragement were provided to meet the demands of the Society as the necessities arose, so the need of their careful and diligent observance was the more evident. "While most of these who were thus

* J. Wesley's Works, vol. viii., p. 256.

† Ibid., vol. viii., p. 257, 258.

intimately joined together went on daily from faith to faith, some fell from the faith, either all at once, by falling into known, wilful sin ; or gradually and almost insensibly, by giving way in what they called little things ; by sins of omission, by yielding to heart sins, or by not watching unto prayer. The exhortations and prayers used among the believers did no longer profit these. They wanted advice and instructions suited to their case ; which as soon as I observed, I separated them from the rest, and desired them to meet me apart on Saturday evenings. At this hour, all the hymns, exhortations and prayers are adapted to their circumstances, being wholly suited to those who *did* see God, but have now lost sight of the light of His countenance, and who mourn after Him, and refuse to be comforted till they know He has healed their back-sliding."

The success of this plan involved the need of continual diligence. "Many soon recovered the ground they had lost ; yea, rose higher than before, being more watchful than ever, and more meek and lowly, as well as stronger in the faith that worketh by love. They now outran the greater part of their brethren, continually walking in the light of God, and having fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. I saw it might be useful to give some advices to all those who continued in the light of God's countenance, which the rest of their brethren did not want, and probably could not receive. So I desired a small number of such as appeared to be in this state to spend an hour with me every Monday morning. My design was not only to direct them how to press after perfection ; to exercise their every grace, and improve every talent they had received, and to incite them to love one another more, and to watch more carefully over each other ; but also to have a select *company*, to whom I might unbosom myself on all occasions, *without* reserve ; and whom I could propose to all their

brethren as a pattern of love, of holiness and of good works.”*

This simple and beautiful story of spiritual training, traces, in fact, the practical development of the Class and Band Meeting principle, and shows what was found necessary by Wesley and his companions, to the preservation and guidance of their converts in the pursuit of Scriptural holiness. It was the old necessity felt by Apostles, and happily acknowledged by many obedient associations of their converts; though neglected by some Apostolic Churches to their own decay and dissolution, and trifled with or ignored by spiritual revivalists of later times, until the fruit of their toil has all but entirely perished from the field. That nothing short of the Methodist discipline of fellowship was equal to the mere preservation of the gathered converts from spiritual death, is painfully evident from the recorded experience of Wesley, even amidst the triumphs of truth which he witnessed. “The world say,” he remarks, “the Methodists are no better than other people. This is not true. But it is nearer the truth than we are willing to believe. For personal religion either toward God or man is amazingly superficial among us. I can but just touch on a few generals. How little faith is there among us! How little communion with God! How little living in heaven, walking in eternity, deadness to every creature! How much love of the world; desire of pleasure, of ease, of getting money! How little brotherly love! What continual judging one another! What gossiping, evil speaking, tale bearing! What want of moral honesty! To instance only in one or two particulars; who does as he would be done by in buying and selling, particularly in selling horses! Write him a knave that does not. And the Methodist

* J. Wesley’s Works, vol. viii., pp. 259, 260.

knaves is the worst of all knaves. Family religion is shamefully wanting, and almost in every branch. And the Methodists in general will be little the better till we take quite another course with them. For what avails public preaching alone, though we could preach like angels?"*

Wesley might be looking at Methodism in later times, and bemoaning its condition. He saw and deplored in his day the things which grieve many who come after him. The lesson is solemn. It is a lesson first to Methodists themselves. If with all the appliances of Methodist discipline matured as it was by men so wise, so gifted and so holy, it proved so difficult to keep the converts gathered out of the world from being "again entangled therein and overcome;" what is to be the result if the only means of preservation and spiritual growth which has been proved at all effective be allowed to pass into disuse? Human nature being what it is who does not, in such a case, forecast the end? The institution of "Bands" has already fallen into disuse by the many; leaving Methodism with a lessening number of highly disciplined converts. Is the Class-Meeting to follow, and become a thing of the past? Its necessity, as the means of spiritual growth for the souls gathered into Methodist pastures, is most strikingly and impressively seen in the mere existence of a disposition to ignore it. If Methodists *forsake the assembling of themselves together, as the manner of some is*, their barren ordinances, their lifeless machinery and their fruitless preaching will soon testify to the essential importance of an institution which they had lost the grace to appreciate and enjoy.

* J. Wesley's Works, vol. viii., p. 302.

CHAPTER V.

Class-Meetings in their Relation to Sacraments and Devotional Services.

METHODISM from the beginning acknowledged Baptism and the Lord's Supper as Divine ordinances, and has always devoutly observed them as means of grace. Nor have Methodists ceased to be distinguished for their services of "prophecy," of prayer and of song. Whatever notions of baptism Mr. Wesley may have held in his earlier course, nothing is more clear than that as the Leader, Guide and Overseer of the "United Societies," he was most careful to distinguish between baptism and the new birth in the case of both infants and adults. He enforced the due observance of baptism on all the members of the Society, as a divinely instituted ordinance, "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace," the grace of regeneration. "It is not only lawful and innocent," says he, "but meet right and our bounden duty, in conformity to the uninterrupted practice of the whole Church of Christ from the earliest ages, to consecrate our children to God by baptism, as the Jewish Church were commanded to do by circumcision." *

The Societies were taught that all converted parents among them were bound after the example of Jews aforetime and early Christian converts under an Apostolic ministry, to look upon their children as members of the gracious covenant into which they as adopted children

* J. Wesley's Works, vol. x., p. 201.

of God had now entered, and to put the mark of that covenant upon their little ones on the ground of their being members of the kingdom of heaven, and in accordance with the command of Jesus, Who recognizes them and blesses them as His own. This act was to be a part of their outward confession of Christ Whom they had received into their renewed hearts and into their devoted home as the Saviour and Lord of their household. The observance of this solemn rite was also to be their first act in that course of Christian training which, in their renewed life, they were to give to their children, now acknowledged and sealed as members of Christ's covenanted Church. They were to deal with these little members of their home flock, as their Society Leaders and Teachers dealt with them in their weekly meetings for mutual instruction and training as children of God. They were responsible for bringing up these little ones "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord;" while they themselves "as new-born babes" in Christ were nourished with "the sincere milk of the word," or, as they "grew in grace," with "strong meat," by those who were "over them in the Lord, and admonished them," in the course of Church fellowship. Their own spiritual discipline in the weekly class was to be answered by the regulated instruction and guidance of their infant class of Christ's children at home.

The two institutions are analogous. The two courses of training are to be concurrent. Both are necessary parts of Church discipline. Nor does the necessity cease in either case till the training is complete, and the end of the discipline is fulfilled. The one is necessary to the other. If the Lord brings the parent into covenant with Him, it is "that he might seek a godly seed." "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord: and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words which

I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart : and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates.” * God’s Word, His law of love, was revealed to them that it might be *in* them, imbuing their intellect and their heart, as a convincing law, as a regenerating power, as a source of comfort, and as a rule of conduct ; and their enjoyment of the hallowing process carried on in them by the truth, was to prepare them for training their children in the same covenant truth. Their participation of the Divine lessons placed them under the obligation to perpetuate the same blessedness among their children, by all the means in their power ; and their continued enjoyment of their spiritual privileges as members of the Church was necessary to their faithfulness and success in bringing up their children. “ For He established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which He commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children : that the generation to come might know them, even the children which should be born ; who should arise and declare them to their children : that they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments.” †

This law of the Old Covenant became, in its spirit, a rule of Christ’s kingdom. Methodism adopted it ; and rests upon it as a part of its plan for perpetuating as well as “ spreading Scriptural holiness over the land.” Its theory and, indeed, its principle, is that all its converted parents are to be trained by a diligent observance of its

* Deuteronomy vi. 4—9.

+ Psalm lxxviii. 5—7.

distinctive rule of Christian fellowship, under the spiritual guidance of their Pastors and Leaders, for acting, in their turn, as the spiritual nurses or leaders of the children whom God has given them, the little members of the kingdom whom they virtually vowed to bring up for Christ when they presented them in Christian Baptism. And the measure of their own spiritual growth under the weekly culture, which their Society Rules prescribe, is to be their amount of ability to cultivate the home pasture of which they have the charge. The consecration of all Methodist children in baptism was anticipated by Mr. Wesley when, in 1784, he issued a modified form of the Church of England baptismal service for Methodist use. For the assistance of those who were to maintain their consistency as members of the Society by godly discipline at home and the proper instruction of the children whom they had publicly devoted to Christ, it was arranged that among the duties of an "Assistant," or Superintendent Preacher, he was "to take care that every Society be duly supplied with books; particularly with 'Kempis,' 'Instructions for Children,'" etc.* And then, "Let every Preacher, having a catalogue of those in each Society, go to each house. Deal gently with them, that the report of it may move others to desire your coming. Give the children the 'Instructions for Children,' and encourage them to get them by heart. Indeed, you will find it no easy matter to teach the ignorant the principles of religion."†

Among the "ordinances of God," by a regular observance of which those who continued in the Society were to prove their sincere desire for salvation, was "Family Prayer;" and that it might be "the more easily discerned whether they were indeed working out their salvation," by faithfulness to these home duties as well as others, their Class-Leader was to see them "once a week at least," that there might be all

* *J. Wesley's Works*, vol. viii., p. 319. † *Ibid.*, vol. viii., p. 305.

necessary inquiry and mutual instruction and encouragement. Thus, the discipline of Methodism links its different conditions of continued membership, the rule of the Weekly Class-Meeting and the home fulfilment of parental vows at the baptism of infants. Methodist consistency requires the one to be done and the other not to be left undone. Faithfulness in the one will prepare for faithfulness in the other. The neglect of one rule will be a breach in the discipline soon to be followed by carelessness in all. If Methodism is to fulfil its one design, it must be kept up in its entirety. Its purposes demand its combined energies, and unbroken devotion to all its rules. The history of its families, with very few exceptions, will show that just as its distinctive standard of holiness has been diligently and earnestly pursued by parents in their weekly meetings for brotherly communion, the children have been faithful, not only to their baptismal covenant, but to the principles, usages, and design of the religious Society by whose Ministry they were baptized. The records of the Class-Book will generally afford the earliest secret of family apostasy from Methodist life.

Before Mr. Wesley provided his abridged form of Baptism "for such as are of riper years," he taught the Methodists that all those who were brought to repentance or converted under Methodist preaching should, if they had not been baptized in infancy, "make confession unto salvation" in public baptism. So, in a letter to the Bishop of Bristol, in 1741, he says, "Several persons have applied to me for baptism. It has pleased God to make me instrumental in their conversion. This has given them such a prejudice for me, that they desire to be received into the Church by my ministry. They choose likewise to be baptized by immersion, and have engaged me to give your Lordship notice, as the Church requires."*

* J. Wesley's Works, vol. xii., p. 56.

The practice of baptizing adults, in such cases, by the application of water in the name of the Trinity is still continued by the Methodists. In no instance, however, without satisfactory evidence of genuine repentance and faith in Christ on the part of the candidate. The Class-Meeting affords the only means in Methodism of gathering such fairly-tested evidence as would warrant the public acknowledgment of the candidate. Nor could any other mode of testing the sincerity of a professed penitent or believer be so full and various. Three months, or a longer time, as the case may be, are to be spent on trial for membership, in weekly communion with those whose personal experience and knowledge of the candidate qualify them for giving faithful testimony. And only when such testimony confirms the good opinion of the Minister can baptism be consistently administered. The Class is indispensable as a means of spiritual preparation for the initiatory Sacrament of the Church.

As with the Sacrament of Baptism, so with the ordinance of the Lord's Supper. The first Methodists conscientiously observed it as a Divine Institution ; at first in connection with the Church of England of which for a time they considered themselves to be members. But driven from the Table at length by the clergy of that Church, provision had necessarily to be made for partaking of the Supper among themselves. The administration was made for a time, here and there, only by clergymen episcopally ordained ; then, as is well known, Mr. Wesley ordained and set apart others, in accordance with his more mature views of episcopacy. While his carefully prepared Form for the administration of the rite among the Methodists reveals his insight into the future enjoyment of it by all the Societies, in association with their own Ministers. On the qualifications for its proper observance he discoursed for several days in June, 1740, to the Societies, on "Do

this in Remembrance of Me." "I showed at large," says he, "(1) That the Lord's Supper was ordained by God, to be a means of conveying to men either preventing, or justifying, or sanctifying grace, according to their several necessities. (2) That the persons for whom it was ordained, are all those who know and feel that they want the grace of God, either to restrain them from sin, or to show their sins forgiven, or to renew their souls in the image of God. (3) That inasmuch as we come to His Table, not to give Him anything, but to receive whatsoever He sees best for us, there is no previous preparation indispensably necessary, but a desire to receive whatsoever He pleases to give. And (4) That no fitness is required at the time of communicating, but a sense of our state, of our utter sinfulness and helplessness; every one who knows he is fit for hell, being just fit to come to Christ in this as well as all other ways of His appointment." *

From this it is clear that the general qualification for a place at the Lord's Table is substantially the same as the condition of membership in the Methodist Society; "a desire to flee from the wrath to come, and to be saved from their sins." The bare profession of such a desire is not enough in either case. The profession must be tested. "Wherever this is really fixed in the soul, it will be shown by its fruits. It is therefore expected of all who continue in the Society, that they should continue to evidence their desire," by keeping the Rules of the Society. And first of all meeting in Class weekly, that "it may be the more easily discerned" whether their desire be genuine. There is to be the weekly inquiry "how their souls prosper," and the necessary "advice, reproof, comfort, or exhortation is to be given as occasion may require." The quarterly testimony to the fitness of each person to continue in the

* J. Wesley's Works, vol. i., p. 280.

Society is the quarterly ticket. The first introduction of this is recorded by Mr. Wesley himself :—"To each of those of whose seriousness and good conversation I found no reason to doubt, I gave a testimony under my own hand, by writing their name on a ticket prepared for that purpose; every ticket implying as strong a recommendation of the person to whom it was given, as if I had wrote at length, 'I believe the bearer hereof to be one that fears God and works righteousness.'

"Those who bore these tickets (these *συμβόλα* or *tessera*, as the ancients termed them, being of just the same force with the *επιστολαι συστατικαι*, *commendatory letters*, mentioned by the Apostle) wherever they came, were acknowledged by their brethren, and received with all cheerfulness. . . . By these it was easily distinguished, when the Society were to meet apart, who were members of it, and who not. These also supplied us with a quiet and inoffensive method of removing any disorderly member. He has no new ticket at the quarterly visitation (for so often the tickets are changed); and hereby it is immediately known that he is no longer of the community."*

The quarterly visitation of the Classes is now an essential part of the Methodist discipline, and according to rule the production of the last quarterly ticket is required as an introduction to the Lord's Table; on the principle that it is a sufficient "recommendation of the person" as one who, during a faithful attendance on the Class, has given good proof of sincerity of "desire to receive whatsoever Christ is willing to give" at His table. Methodism has no other means of testing the preparation for the Lord's Supper. No other known method has proved so effectual. In cases where members of other churches, or strangers of known Christian sincerity, wish occasionally to communi-

* J. Wesley's Works, vol. viii., pp. 256, 257.

cate with the Methodists, or persons who give reasonable evidence of godly desire, and wish for regular admission to the Table, may, at the discretion of the minister, receive a note of admission to the Sacrament from quarter to quarter. These, however, are necessarily the few exceptions. The Methodist rule is that ordinarily members of classes only, and those who having been approved for consistency in the use of weekly means can show their tickets, are to be admitted as communicants. Upon this rule, with its well guarded exceptions, depends the purity and consistency of the sacred ordinance in Methodism.

The spiritual condition of those who seek access to the Lord's Table, and, therefore, their preparation for that ordinance, can in general be known with comparative certainty through the Leaders only, or by the Minister as the result of his quarterly intercourse with the classes. The presentation of the ticket has, in too many cases, fallen into disuse ; the result of which is, not only a falling off in regularity of attendance at the Class, and a corresponding lack of clear and distinct Christian life among Methodists, but a growing disposition to agitate the question of renouncing the Class as a test of membership in favour of mere attendance at the Lord's Table. It would not be impossible to effect such a change. But such a change would involve the sacrifice of all that is distinctive in Methodism. Methodism stands or falls with the principle that the test of membership must be a test of that spiritual life or earnest desire for its possession which alone can render a worthy participation of the symbolic elements possible. To guard the "cup of the Lord" from such as would drink unworthily, the sincerity of holy desires and the purity of Christian principles on the part of all who seek a place at the Table, must previously be tested. Methodism has no adequate means of doing this but by its rules of Christian fellowship. And

churches have become corrupt in their Sacramental administration just as they have become deficient in such modes of previous discipline. Methodism would not long resist the swell of corruption were it to relax or change its rule of membership. The Table of the Lord might be crowded, but, as in other cases, such a test of membership would be observed with more and more of ease by undecided, doubtful souls ; and at length all possible guards of Sacramental purity would melt away before the influence of social position, the power of wealth, the force of custom, or the fear of law. Methodism may thus lose sight of its original design, and cease to continue its distinctive and adapted means, but then it ceases to be. And when it no longer possesses the means of testing the professions of its communicants, the sooner it gives way the better ; to be followed by some more holy people, who will more faithfully persevere in the design of "spreading Scriptural holiness over the land" and through the world. While Methodism holds fast its integrity, the Lord's Supper is the privilege of its members ; but the faithful use of the Class-Meeting, or its equivalent, is necessary in order to test the validity of their claims to membership.

Mr. Wesley, when recording the formation of the Classes and Bands, and his first arrangement for meeting them once a week, that they might unite in praise to "the Giver of every good gift, for whatsoever mercies they had received," goes on to say, "In order to increase in them a grateful sense of all His mercies, I desired that, one evening in a quarter, all the men in Band ; on a second, all the women would meet ; and on a third both men and women together ; that we might together 'eat bread,' as the ancient Christians did, 'with gladness and singleness of heart.' At these Lovefeasts (so we termed them, retaining the name, as well as the thing which was in use from the beginning) our food is only a little plain cake

and water. But we seldom return from them without being fed, not only with the ‘meat which perisheth,’ but with ‘that which endureth to everlasting life.’”*

This was the origin of the Methodist Lovefeast. It is still observed and still enjoyed, as the first meeting was, by all who, like their fathers, live in the spirit of the primitive Church. The Lovefeast may be called the Methodist service of “Prophecy.” When the Blessed Spirit was given at Pentecost, all the members of the believing Church were “filled with the Holy Ghost.” The fulness was such that no person was left untouched; no individual power was uninfluenced. All were pervaded, and each was so entirely penetrated, that every character was thoroughly renewed and moulded into entire readiness for the Master’s will. The hallowing power was, in this case, associated with such miraculous gifts as attested the Divine character of the visitation; but the grace given was exemplary, it formed the first-fruit of the Spirit’s sanctifying work in the believing Church. In the persons of this blessed assembly human nature was brought back into holy communion with the Trinity. And the immediate consequence was, that they began to speak with “other tongues.” Their sanctified souls found happy expression through their sanctified tongues. The tongue was restored to its original design, and was now the organ of expression for the holy and rapturous heart. This burst of praise from the inspired company was partly miraculous, in that various languages were spoken to meet the present requirements of the newly spread Gospel; but the style of the praise from these new-born souls was typical. It was a style of Christian prophesy that the Christian Church was to exemplify in all ages. There were bursts of feeling and successive utterances, such as would break forth from full souls who were somewhat

* J. Wealey’s Works, vol. viii., pp. 258, 259.

burdened with their theme. There was the issue of pithy, powerful sentences, apothegms, thrown out under the Divine afflatus, and bearing evidence of the Divine wisdom and goodness, as well as the power which constrained the speakers. The theme of their utterances was "the wonderful works of God,"—the wonders of that grace and blessedness which they had found in the fulfilment of the Father's promise. Each was taking up his psalm, and crying, "Come and hear, all ye that fear God, and I will declare what He hath done for my soul." "This is that," said St. Peter, in explanation of the scene, "this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel; And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of My Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy."* It was the simple, warm, outspoken utterance of renewed hearts, telling out their happy story of mercy, love, and salvation. It was that spiritual gift of prophecy which was given to the children of the new-born Church: the first voice of "first love," that gracious power of expressing spiritual life which was to be more earnestly coveted by believers than mere miraculous tongues; the more excellent gift which reflected the purest joy on the speaker, and promoted the richest edification of the hearer.

This primitive Christian prophesying "according to the proportion of faith," was analogous to the lively, gushing, extemporaneous effusions of a true Methodist Lovefeast; such a Lovefeast as was held in Fetter-Lane in January, 1739, when, says Mr. Wesley, "about sixty of our brethren" were with us. "About three in the morning, as we were continuing instant in prayer, the power of God came mightily upon us, insomuch that many cried out for exceeding joy, and many fell to the ground. As soon as we were recovered a little from that awe and amazement at

* *Acts of the Apostles* ii. 16, 17.

the presence of His Majesty, we broke out with one voice, ‘We praise Thee, O God ; we acknowledge Thee to be the Lord !’”*

These meetings for free and spontaneous confessions of God’s goodness and open discourses to one another on their various Christian experiences, were from the first the peculiar privilege of the Society. Mr. Wesley, in his “Plain Account of the People called Methodists,” traces the early history of the Institution, and shows how it sprang out of the successful action of the Band and Class Meetings. They were so akin as not to be separated ; they followed each other in necessary order ; and, by rule, the observance of one is the condition of access to the other. The Class-ticket alone secures the privilege of the Lovefeast ; nor can any but members be admitted, except those to whom the Minister gives a note, recognizing them as candidates for membership. The reason is plain. Lovefeasts can be neither appreciated nor enjoyed by any but spiritual minds, or those who are sincerely seeking the blessings of spiritual life. All such in Methodism must have given proof of their sincerity by diligently using the means afforded in the weekly Class ; nor will any but those who have realized the full benefit of the holy discipline and edifying fellowship of the Class ever prove themselves quite equal to the privilege and grace of giving or receiving the experimental ministrations of the Lovefeast. The weekly intercourse alone can fully qualify for the quarterly joy of spiritual retrospect or review. The Lovefeasts of Methodism are quarterly renewals of its spiritual life—that life upon the health and power of which its continued prosperity depends.

It is said that many Methodists are now ceasing to value Lovefeasts, or are failing to attend them, or are even affecting to ignore them as a privilege in Methodism. To know that this is alleged is painful ; and, if proved to be fact, it is

* J. Wesley’s Works, vol. i., p. 170.

sadly significant. The evidence advanced would show that where the neglect is apparent it is almost peculiar to members of the higher social class in the body, those at least who claim to move in the more genteel circles of life. To these the time of the Lovefeast or its associations are found to be inconvenient. Such meetings are, in too many cases, left to the poorer members, or, as it is thought, to the less-cultured people who have time and inclination to attend them, and to whose taste they are more adapted.

This slight on the Lovefeast, however, is generally found allied to neglect of the Class-Meeting ; and indicates, not the really lessened value of such means of grace for the purposes of Methodism, but the decay of true distinctness and healthy decision of Methodist Christian character among those whose zeal ought to rise with their social advance. There would seem to be a tendency to form distinctions within the Society inconsistent with the Christian equality of God's children. This tendency is seen, not only in the fact that the Lovefeast is sometimes abandoned by the few, as an institution suited only to the less intelligent many, but in the too evident desire, here and there, either to abstain from the Class-Meeting on the same principle, or to preserve for the *bettermost* class a formal connection with the Society, by enrolling them only with those of the same social condition in the same Class-Book. There may be a danger of forming Methodist castes. Now, the genuine Class-Meeting, open without distinction to all who "desire to flee from the wrath to come, and to be saved from sin," is a grand preservative of the New Testament principle and practice of Christian brotherhood. And human nature being what it is, among Methodists as well as other people, nothing but the faithful maintenance of the Class-Meeting in its true simplicity and primitive spirit will preserve the vital unity of Methodism, and hold it to the earnest and *unselfish* pursuit of its unworldly design.

Methodism has ever been, by the grace of God, remarkable for its gift of prayer and intercession. It has never as yet entirely given up a reverent use of the Liturgy of the Church from which it sprang, and from which it was eventually cast out. Either Mr. Wesley's abridgment of that Liturgy or its full form is still a part of the Sunday morning service in Methodist Chapels here and there. But the true life of Methodism, and its richest and widest prosperity, have been in answer to those childlike pleadings and that agony of prayer which, under the Divine unction, its people have sustained in private and in public.

No unworthy comparison is made with other Churches; but God may be glorified for the spirit and voice of that mighty prayer, which has so often brought down bursting clouds of blessing on the Methodist Societies, and on trembling multitudes of listening sinners. By far the greater number of the most gracious and wide-spreading revivals, which have in ceaseless succession marked the history of Methodism, have begun in Prayer-Meetings. Often, for a long time before the full saving power has been manifested, have the *two or three agreed touching the thing that they have asked*; and often have the promise and earnest of what was afterward done come upon the pleading few, like "the sound of a going in the tops of the mulberry trees," foretelling the Divine approach. And when the Spirit has come to save, He has in many instances honoured the scene of special intercession with His first revelations of convincing and converting grace. The work thus begun has been, in all cases, carried on by the aid of praying men and women, who have proved themselves ready for untiring intercession on behalf of those who cried, "Men and brethren what shall we do?" It has been seen and felt, at such times, that as soon as God's work called for them there were men and women who seemed to be impersonations of prayer, faith, and loving zeal, prepared for all sacrifices of

time and power in an unbroken course of devotion to prayer and supplication.

This reserve of praying power is, in a great measure, peculiar to Methodism. No people have shown themselves so full of devotional gifts, and so possessed of prevalent energy among gathering crowds of earnest seekers. The rapidly-growing numbers who, from time to time, have pressed into the Societies, could never have been guided to the Mercy-seat, or permanently brought under saving grace, but for this abundant spirit of prayer. This is essential to Methodist success. Where did this gift first show itself? Where did this voice give out its first utterances? Where was the power first felt? Where was the grace nurtured and by exercise brought up to its maturity? In the Class-Meeting. The Class-Meeting is the nursery of Methodistic revival power, because it is the school for the development of its grace and expression of prayer. Who are the people that have spent nights as well as days in wrestling with God for baptisms of the Holy Ghost? Who are those who have been always ready to continue in prayer for the converting energy of truth? Whose are the voices that ceaselessly cry on behalf of sinners? Who are those to whose intercessions penitent sinners are most indebted? To whom does Methodism owe the sustenance of its revival work and the permanence of its prayerful life? Not those who dispense with the Prayer-Meeting, in comfortable satisfaction with their strict attention to the rubric, or those for whom prayer loses its virtue, just as in language and tone it deviates from the prescribed form; for these scarcely breathe the native spirit of Methodism, nor are they ever distinguished for a warm pursuit of its primitive design, or a diligent observance of its distinctive means of grace. No; the vital prosperity of Methodism, the saving vigour of its action, depends upon the prayerful earnest spirits who have been trained

to hearty devotion in its Classes, and whose gifts and powers of prayer have been matured under the godly discipline of weekly fellowship. But for that fellowship an unnumbered class, who from the beginning have been essential to the healthy action and happiest successes of Methodism, would die out from it, and leave it to wither into sapless formalism. It is the praying class whose gifts of prayer have ripened under purely spiritual culture. Many a raw, uncultivated lad has been led into the Class-Meeting under strong religious feeling. There, at first, he would scarcely have sufficient command of his native tongue intelligibly to express the feelings of his soul, and, perhaps, under ordinary circumstances, would never issue a pure or correct sentence ; but, unaccountably to all but those who acknowledge the work of a Divine Teacher, that same lad in his weekly intercourse with his Leader and Class-mates begins to talk with propriety about spiritual things, and at length, by dint of exercise in sincere prayer, he learns to "pray with the Spirit and with understanding also," and might gracefully and with holy effect lead the devotions of an intelligent and even educated congregation. The praying ranks of Methodism derive their most useful power from such trained recruits, and must always depend upon such strength for the fulfilment of the work which is dearest to its heart, and most necessary to the completion of its first and only purpose. When its Class-Meetings are dissolved, its real praying power will be lost.

The service of song, too, among Methodists, owes much of its native power and liveliness to the Class-Meeting and its kindred means. The spirit of their singing has been fully as remarkable as the energy of their prayers. Under the influence of their saintly poet, Charles Wesley, and guided and instructed by his brother John, the early Societies were soon notable for the heartiness and jubilant style in which they were heard "teaching and admonishing one

another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs," "singing and making melody in their heart to the Lord." As other great religious revivals were revivals of psalmody, so was it with Methodism. It was soon felt that singing would have much to do with the successful pursuit of its holy design. John Wesley saw that, without care, the holy purposes of the Society might be crossed by carelessness, formality, or ill-taste in singing. And while a zeal for spiritual song was begotten by the issue of his brother's wondrous variety of hymns, he sought to adapt music to the Methodist verse, and so to regulate the singing as to preserve and deepen the simple and warm devotion of the rejoicing people.

Singing was to serve, not only to express the praise and thanksgiving and longing desires of devout converts, but to give out saving truth to surrounding multitudes, and to draw into closer and more heavenly fellowship the growing crowds of believers. Hence everything which was inconsistent with the holy calling of the Societies was at once checked. "I came to Warrington," says the Methodist "Watcher," "just in time to put a stop to a bad custom which was creeping in here. A few men, who had fine voices, sang a psalm which no one knew, in a tune fit for an opera, wherein three, four, or five persons sang different words at the same time! What an insult upon common-sense! What a burlesque upon public worship! No custom can excuse such a mixture of profaneness and absurdity.* Due encouragement, however, was given, wherever the true spirit of singing gave consistent expression to devout feeling. "The preaching-house" at Peel "contained all that would come. Afterwards, Mr. Crook desired me to meet the singers. I was agreeably surprised. I have not heard better singing, either at Bristol or London. Many, both men and women, have admirable voices; and they sing with good judgment. Who would have expected

* J. Wesley's Works, vol. iv., p. 200.

this in the Isle of Man?"* Methodist singing, not only in London and Bristol, but generally, soon took a peculiar character. It was as distinct from the general fashion as Methodism in its spiritual character was distinct from the world. It was a restoration of primitive simplicity in Church music, answering to the conformity of the singers to the primitive simplicity of spirit. "I was much surprised," says Mr. Wesley, "in reading an 'Essay on Music,' wrote by one who is a thorough master of the subject, to find that the music of the ancients was as simple as that of the Methodists; that their music wholly consisted of melody, or the arrangement of single notes; that what is now called harmony, singing in parts, the whole of counterpoint and fugues, is quite novel, being never known in the world till the Popedom of Leo the Tenth. He farther observes that, as the singing different words by different persons at the very same time necessarily prevents attention to the sense, so it frequently destroys melody for the sake of harmony; meantime, it destroys the very end of music, which is to affect the passions."† Methodist singing did not make its near approach to the high standard of simplicity, power, truthfulness, and purity of spirit which was set up, without many cautions, instructions, and formal laws. Full directions were issued, "That this part of Divine worship may be more acceptable to God, as well as more profitable to yourself and others, be careful to observe the following directions:—

"1. Sing *all*. See that you join with the congregation as frequently as you can. Let not a slight degree of weakness or weariness hinder you. If it is a cross to you, take it up, and you will find a blessing.

"2. Sing *lustily*, and with a good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half-dead, or half-asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. Be no more afraid of your

* J. Wesley's Works, vol. iv., p. 206. † Ibid, vol. iii., p. 348.

voice now, no more ashamed of its being heard, than when you sung the songs of Satan.

“3. Sing *modestly*. Do not bawl, so as to be heard above, or distinct from, the rest of the congregation, that you may not destroy the harmony; but strive to unite your voices together, so as to make one clear melodious sound.

“4. Sing *in time*. Whatever time is sung be sure to keep with it. Do not run before, nor stay behind it; but attend closely to the leading voices, and move therewith as exactly as you can, and take care you sing not too slow. This drawling way naturally steals on all who are lazy, and it is high time to drive it out from among us, and sing all our tunes just as quick as we did at first.

“5. Above all, sing *spiritually*. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing Him more than yourself, or any other creature. In order to this, attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually; so shall your singing be such as the Lord will approve of here, and reward when He cometh in the clouds of heaven.”*

These instructions are evidently grounded on the principle, that if Methodist singing is to be what it ought to be, or if it is to keep its truly Christian character, it must be the purely natural outflow of deeply devout and truly happy souls. It is equally evident that the appeal was made chiefly to the Society. They were to give a character and tone to the congregational voice. They were to form the school of Methodist music. This is confirmed by the authority of an early Conference:—

“How shall we guard against formality in public worship, particularly in singing?

“By preaching frequently on the head; by taking care

* J. Wesley's Works, vol. xiv., p. 346.

to speak only what we feel ; by choosing such hymns as are proper ; . . . by suiting the tune to the words. . . Is not this formality creeping in already by those complex tunes, which it is scarcely possible to sing with devotion ? . . . Do not suffer the people to sing too slow. This naturally tends to formality, and is brought in by them who have either very strong or very weak voices. In every large Society let them learn to sing, and let them always learn our own tunes first. Let the women constantly sing their parts alone. Let no man sing with them, unless he understands the notes, and sings the bass as it is pricked down in the book. Introduce no new tunes till they are perfect in the old.”*

Thus the Societies were to learn to sing. They were to be the responsible Leaders. Their spirituality was to give life to their science. Their hearts were to be in tuneful intercourse with God, while their voices were in tune with one another. Such lessons could be practised with effect only when the Societies met apart. It required the unchecked union and communion of pure and sincere hearts. It was only from amidst the select gathering, the Lovefeast, or especially the weekly Class, that such music could arise ; from among those only who could unitedly sing :—

“ Jesus, soft, harmonious Name,
Every faithful heart’s desire ;
See Thy followers, O Lamb !
All at once to Thee aspire :
Drawn by Thy uniting grace,
After Thee we swiftly run ;
Hand in hand we seek Thy face :
Come, and perfect us in one.

“ Mollify our harsher will ;
Each to each our tempers suit,
By Thy modulating skill
Heart to heart, as lute to lute :

* J. Wesley’s Works, vol. viii., pp. 318, 319.

Sweetly on our spirits move ;
 Gently touch the trembling strings ;
 Make the harmony of love,
 Music for the King of kings !”

And, in fact, it was in these happy scenes of weekly fellowship that Methodists learnt to sing. There it was heart singing. And from those “heavenly places” there came every week those thrilling voices which inspired the multitudes and gave a resistless power to the glorious hymns which arose throughout the awakened Kingdom. For these Charles Wesley composed those deeply spiritual songs of mutual delight, and those triumphal hymns of love and full assurance which form so large a section of the Methodist hymnology, the hymns “For the Society on Meeting,” “For the Society Giving Thanks,” “For the Society Praying,” and “For the Society at Parting.” These are all exclusively adapted to souls strong in mutual faith, and so akin in spirit as to be “comforted together” in holy communion with each other, with Christ, and with heaven. They are true Class-Meeting hymns, or hymns for the Bands, the Lovefeast, or “the Societies meeting apart.” Filled with the spirit of these hymns, each class was prepared for “the service of song” at all times and in every place. How finely the voices and hearts of the class mingle their prayers and praise, their desires and hopes !

“ Come, Wisdom, Power, and Grace Divine,
 Come, Jesus, in Thy name to join
 A happy chosen band ;
 Who fain would prove Thine utmost will,
 And all Thy righteous laws fulfil,
 In love’s benign command.

“ Still may we to our centre tend,—
 To spread Thy praise our common end,
 To help each other on ;

Companions through the wilderness,
To share a moment's pain, and seize
An everlasting crown."

"O Saviour, cast a gracious smile !
Our gloomy guilt, and selfish guile,
And shy distrust remove :
The true simplicity impart,
To fashion every passive heart,
And mould it into love.

"Jesus fulfil our one desire,
And spread the spark of living fire
Through every hallow'd breast ;
Bless with divine conformity,
And give us now to find in Thee
Our everlasting rest."

Without their Class-Meetings, songs like these would never have burst from Methodist lips; without its Class-Meetings, songs like these would necessarily die from the lips of Methodism. They were made for a Class-Meeting people. And they fell from the lips of an author whose rich variety of Christian fellowship-songs prove that he could never conceive of Methodist Societies without such means of pouring spiritual melody into one another's hearts as the Classes and Society gatherings afford. It is significant that those who would fain rid themselves of the rule and discipline of the Class, and allow the institution to fall into disuse, or cease to be an obligation, are often those who shrink from the use of the hymns in which the first warm and spiritually-minded Methodists most of all delighted, and in singing which they gave forth that swing and swell of music, that ringing, rapturous, all-subduing melody which charmed even the hostile world into silence. Hymns like these, of such deep spirituality, soaring heavenliness, and harmonizing spirit, can be sung nowhere but in meetings

such as those for which they were composed. They cannot belong to those who acknowledge no bonds of spiritual life, and who know no "communion of saints," but in voiceless form. It is significant, too, that just as the Methodist rule of weekly fellowship ceases to be enjoyed, Methodist people either lose their singing power or fall into the musical formality, spiritless science, and powerless conceits which Primitive Methodism condemned, and against the mischievous consequence of which Mr. Wesley did so much to guard the Societies. In such cases the old hymns prove too strong, and the old tunes are too rude. They cannot "sing *lustily*" who are powerless to "sing *spiritually*;" and spiritual singing generally ceases when the regulated and mutual culture of spiritual life fails. Is Methodism losing its singing power? Are the Methodists learning to sing by proxy? Or are they becoming more and more dependent upon organs and paid singers or amateurs in the nice, pretty, soulless, unexpressive harmonies of modern fashion? If Methodism would save itself, its music must break from its heart. Its "Societies must learn to sing" as their fathers did, in Band and Class and Lovefeast interchanges of spiritual melody and admonition. If the design of their Hymn-Book is to be fulfilled, Methodists must be faithful to their rule of membership, and so deeply drink into the spirit of their distinctive discipline as to fill their Class-Meetings with the music of that inimitable hymn which breathes the essential life of Methodism.

" Jesus, united by Thy grace,
And each to each endear'd,
With confidence we seek Thy face,
And know our prayer is heard.

" Still let us own our common Lord,
And bear Thine easy yoke ;
A band of love, a threefold cord,
Which never can be broke.

“ Make us into one spirit drink ;
 Baptize into Thy name ;
And let us always kindly think,
 And sweetly speak, the same.

“ Touch’d by the loadstone of Thy love,
 Let all our hearts agree ;
And ever tow’rds each other move,
 And ever move tow’rds Thee.

“ To Thee inseparably join’d,
 Let all our spirits cleave ;
O may we all the loving mind
 That was in Thee receive !

“ This is the bond of perfectness,
 Thy spotless charity ;
O let us (still we pray) possess
 The mind that was in Thee !

“ Grant this, and then from all below
 Insensibly remove :
Our souls their change shall scarcely know,
 Made perfect first in love !

“ With ease our souls through death shall glide
 Into their paradise ;
And thence, on wings of angels, ride
 Triumphant through the skies.

“ Yet, when the fullest joy is given,
 The same delight we prove ;
In earth, in paradise, in heaven,
 Our all in all is love.”

Methodism has always prospered while she has been faithful to herself and to her God, under whose Providence and Spirit her rule of discipline was framed. She has spread holiness while she has cultured her own spirituality in the faithful use of her Sacraments, her Lovefeasts, and her meetings for weekly fellowship. She has by experience proved that her power of prayer and her spirit of song

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have been kept alive by diligent observance of Methodist rule ; that as her rule has been relaxed her power with God has failed, and the tone of her spiritual melody has sunk. Her standard of prosperity is still high ; she has proved her organization to be equal to her purpose, and she will therefore continue to prosper only while she acts on that proof, and fairly works her proved machinery in the full spirit of its original design.

CHAPTER VI.

*Class-Meetings in their Relation to the Agencies
of Methodism.*

THE Agencies of Methodism form an organization such as never was surpassed, perhaps scarcely equalled, by any mere Church machinery in Christian times. There have been clerical hierarchies far more grand in the variety of their orders and in the combination of their powers. There have been lay associations more subtle in their working and more complex in the multitude of their objects ; but nothing has ever appeared in which the mere official and the popular, the native and the artificial elements have been so harmoniously united and arranged as in the Agencies of Methodism. Among these agencies is the body of Local Preachers. As a body, they are peculiar to Methodism. They form an essential part of Methodist machinery ; a part on the healthy action of which, the continued life of the system depends.

There are in the United Kingdom more than seven hundred Circuits, each having its central city or town. Around each of these centres cluster an average number of about twelve or fourteen outstanding or country places. In all these the Gospel is preached on Sundays, either in chapels, preaching-rooms, or cottages, and the services are for the most part conducted by Local Preachers. But for these services the larger portion of our English rural population would be left without the ministration of saving truth, such ministrations, at least, as meet their condition, suit their intellect, and reach the consciences and heart of the people. The

more regular Ministers preach on Sundays, in most cases, at the great centres, visiting the country places occasionally on the Sunday, and each place periodically on a week day, once, twice or four times in the month. The oversight of both town and country Societies devolves on the Circuit Ministers, or co-pastors. On the labours of the Local Preachers, therefore, the country places depend mainly for their weekly ministrations of the Word, and the conversions which that Word effects are very largely the fruit of such labours.

The learning of most of these labourers is but little, except in the English Bible. Their language may not always be critically pure and accurate, though it is generally Saxon enough to be powerful and clear. In some cases there may be too strong a puritan-like conceit in the choice of texts, as when a good old man selected the statement from Solomon's Song, " King Solomon made himself a chariot of the wood of Lebanon. He made the pillars thereof of silver, the bottom thereof of gold, the covering of it of purple, the midst thereof being paved with love, for the daughters of Jerusalem ; " and there may, now and then, be more of ingenuity than judgment in their rather patristical mode of extracting evangelical truths from doubtful texts, as when out of the catalogue of Hiram's castings, the Preacher read, " One sea, and twelve oxen under the sea ; " and proceeded to teach that Christ was thus prefigured. The brass is one metal and yet two, showing Christ's two natures in one person ; the circular shape of the sea representing His eternal existence ; the fulness of water in the sea indicating the plenitude of redeeming grace ; and the twelve oxen figuring the twelve Apostles, looking east, west, north and south, or going into all the world to preach the gospel to every creature. Sometimes there may have been a grotesque mixture of the serious and the comic in making appeals to the conscience of sinners by reiterating the exclamation of the Psalmist's foes, " Aha !

aha!" It is possible, too, that among so many men, men of such varied mental character and training, failures in exposition of well chosen texts may occur. There may be among them, as among classes of higher pretension, an occasional lack of clearness, soundness, and well-pointed sense. But with all this, as a body of exhorters, lay preachers, or expositors, Methodist Local Preachers are unequalled in the variety of their gifts, the grace of their religious character, and the success of their labours. Those who listen to them are always sure of some truth for the understanding, some lesson for the conscience, some good for the heart ; and their adaptation, as an agency, to the people among whom they labour, is as beautiful as it is effective.

A leading national writer discussing lately the merits of the established clergy, says, "The early Christians did not expect the world would come to them. They invaded the world at all points and succeeded in dispersing its indifference. . . . Take a Methodist Preacher who has something to say, and who says it with all his heart ; set him down in a village under the shadow of the finest Church, or in a city within earshot of the finest Cathedral, and he will fill in a short time the commonest and baldest barn. Let a Church of England Minister display the same enthusiasm, and he will have, at least, as much success, though he may trouble himself little about the externals of parish management, or 'the movements of the day.' The mass of the people have been reached again and again in history. They have been stirred to greater emotion and earnestness than any other classes. But whenever they have been thus moved it has been by Preachers who had their whole souls intent on substantial truth and on a simple message. It was neither attractive services, nor charitable alms, nor social sympathies which drew crowds of rough miners round Wesley and Whitefield, and in all ages the common

people have heard most gladly, not those who have most to give, but those who have the best to say. If religion be for them a reality at all, there are wants in their minds for which they crave an answer, and when the answer is given, they grasp it with extraordinary eagerness. We recognize, in short, the excellence of the motives which prompt Clergy and Bishops in these days to endeavour at being ‘all things to all men.’ But their sole permanent strength lies in the truth of which they are commissioned to speak, and in their power to interpret it so as to touch the hearts and enlighten the minds of the people. They might spare much of the time and energy they now bestow on minor matters if they would cultivate a more independent, and therefore more manly, reliance on the great realities of their religion.” *

This impressive lesson on Preachers and preaching is sustained by the facts of Methodist history, and may find illustration in the character, preaching, and success of Methodist Preachers. The writer happily indicates the secret of that power by which, with all their comparative poverty and lack of clerical culture, they have hitherto kept the ears and reached the hearts of so many people. They have had gracious success while their “whole soul has been intent on substantial truth and on a simple message.” Their “enthusiasm,” which others are called to emulate, is however, that pure zeal which “the love of Christ” inspires. The secret of their warm and saving influence is traceable to a sound conversion. If the “love of truth is the secret of being a good Preacher,” they have shown themselves to be in possession of it. The truth from their lips has come glowing from renewed hearts, and has therefore touched, melted, and drawn the hearts of others to Christ. Their labours have been successful as they “have preached the Gospel with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven.”

* “The Times,” January 27th, 1872.

"Men of like passions with" their neighbours, they have given the simple message of salvation in the spirit of Him who sent them. They have spoken in the Spirit because they have lived in the Spirit ; and have been taught from above the lessons which they wished with all their heart to teach. The hymn which Charles Wesley puts into the lips and heart of a "Lay Preacher," happily expresses the principle and feeling of the true-hearted multitude which Methodism sends out with news of Divine mercy as every Sunday morning opens upon the gathering congregations in country and town.

"I thank Thee, Lord of earth and heaven,
That Thou to me, e'en me, hast given
The knowledge of Thy grace,
(Which flesh and blood could ne'er reveal,)
And call'd a babe Thy love to tell,
And stammer out Thy praise.

"None of the *sacred* order I,
Yet dare I not the grace deny
Thou hast on me bestow'd,
Constrain'd to *speak* in Jesu's name,
And show poor souls the' atoning Lamb,
And point them to His blood.

"I now believe, and therefore speak,
And, found myself, go forth to seek
The sheep that wander still ;
For these I toil, for these I care,
And faithfully to all declare
The peace which all may feel.

"My God supply Thy servant's need,
If Thou hast sent me forth indeed
To make Thy goodness known ;
Thy Son in sinners' hearts reveal,
By gracious signs my mission seal,
And prove the word Thine own.

" O for Thy only Jesu's sake
Into those arms of mercy take
 Thy meanest messenger ;
And ever in Thy keeping have,
And grant me, Lord, at last to save
 Myself with all that hear."

The discipline of Methodism is framed with the design of preserving and cultivating this purity of Christian principle, motive, feeling, and purpose in the character of its Local Preachers. And while that discipline has been faithfully maintained, the results have graciously shown how far human arrangements and prudential order can secure the continuous spiritual life of widespread agencies. The door of admission to the Local Preacher's work is carefully and prayerfully guarded. It is wisely narrowed against loose pretension, doubtful motives, and questionable impulse or design. A sound conversion is held to be a necessary qualification for the work, and without some good evidence of such a spiritual change, no initiatory step can be taken even towards trial for the office. Whatever the personal gifts may be, the personal enjoyment of that salvation which the Preacher is sent to proclaim, is essential to the Divine sanction, and therefore is indispensable to the sanction of the Church, as well as to the Preacher's power, comfort, and success. Now, as one of the ground principles of Methodism is, that " Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God ; and every one that loveth Him that begat loveth Him also that is begotten of Him ;"** that those whose sympathies and affections are renewed and hallowed by the Holy Ghost, feeling themselves to be children of the same " household of faith," love one another because they love Christ, and spiritually commune with one another because they commune with Christ ; it is assumed by the rules of

* 1 John v. 1.

Methodism that those who have been brought into "newness of life" by its means will, as its spiritual children under Christ, "first give their own selves to the Lord," and to those "by the will of God" who "in Christ Jesus have begotten" them "through the Gospel."*

It is provided that the spiritual children of Methodism "come together" so as to give forth those reflections of saving grace by which the marks of the new birth, and the evidences of their spiritual life may be made clear. The Class-Meeting in Methodism affords the only satisfactory means of ascertaining the spiritual fitness of its members for spiritual office. It is for the Minister to give his sanction to any young man, who, it is thought, may be qualified for preaching work; but it can only be on the evidence of true conversion, and sincere zeal furnished during the young man's diligent observance of weekly fellowship, that the Minister can consistently act. It is through the young man's Leader only, in connection with the testimony of his Class-mates, who have the best means of knowing his spiritual condition, that the Minister and the members of the Local Preachers' meeting, can be certified that he has the requisite grace for a Local Preacher's work. Hence, it is a fixed rule, "All Local Preachers shall meet in Class. No exception shall be made in respect to any who have been Travelling Preachers." This is a vital point. It is felt that on this depends the well sustained power of godliness among the Preachers. There can be no other mode of guarding the purity and consistency of that heart work which must be kept in full vigour among those whose work it is to enforce the necessity of the new birth. While Methodism has wrought up throughout its texture the doctrine of spiritual fellowship in order to the spiritual health of its members, its Preachers cannot keep up to its

* 2 Corinthians viii. 5; 1 Corinthians iv. 15.

calling, or carry out the design of their appointment, without enjoying the full privileges of membership, and exemplifying the full benefit of conformity to Methodist rule. In each Circuit, "the Superintendent shall regularly meet the Local Preachers once a quarter; and no person shall receive a Plan as a Local Preacher, or be suffered to preach among us, as such, without the approval of that meeting. Or, if in any Circuit a regular Local Preachers' Meeting cannot be held, they shall be proposed and approved at the Quarterly Meeting of the Circuit." *

The order of this Local Preachers' Quarterly Meeting includes an examination as to each person on the Preachers' Plan; and the questions have respect to consistency of religious character, continued belief in the standard Methodist doctrines, and faithful attention to Methodist discipline, in particular with regard to their duties as Local Preacher. The questions as to piety and discipline always involve that of the Class-Meeting. It is felt that satisfactory evidence of sustained religious power and consistent diligence in the cultivation of regulated zeal so depends on the maintenance of devout fellowship, that a failure of attendance at Class for one quarter, of itself, disqualifies for effective action as a Local Preacher. On the Leader's report that a Local Preacher has ceased to meet in Class, the Local Preachers drop his name from their list, as a matter of course. In case of any alleged religious inconsistency, or moral defect on the part of a Preacher, the Class-Leaders' Meeting is the court of appeal; and the unfavourable judgment of that court must necessarily be followed by an unfavourable decision against him on the part of the Local Preachers. Every Local Preacher is dealt with as a member of the Society on all questions of religious qualification for office. A Preacher stands or falls in the exercise of his gifts just as

* Rules "Of Local Preachers."

he is faithful or otherwise to his calling as a Methodist, and to the rule of fellowship which prescribes the weekly Class as a means of spiritual culture. It is interesting to mark the strictness with which Mr. Wesley acted on this principle from the first. The "Lay Preachers" of his time, to whom the title of "Local Preachers" is now given, he styles "Exhorters." These were to be retained in office or excluded on the report of the Society Stewards, as representing the Society or united Classes.

In the West of Cornwall, on July 9th, 1747, "The Stewards of all the Societies met," he says, "I now diligently inquired what Exhorters there were in each Society; whether they had gifts meet for the work; whether their lives were eminently holy; and whether there appeared any fruit of their labour. I found upon the whole (1) That there were no less than eighteen Exhorters in the county. (2) That three of these had no gifts at all for the work, neither natural nor supernatural. (3) That a fourth had neither gifts nor grace; but was a dull, empty, self-conceited man. (4) That a fifth had considerable gifts, but had evidently made shipwreck of the grace of God. These, therefore, I determined immediately to set aside, and advise our Societies not to hear them. (5) That J. B., A. L., and J. W., had gifts and grace, and had been much blessed in the work. Lastly, that the rest might be helpful when there was no Preacher in their own or the neighbouring Societies, provided they would take no step without the advice of those who had more experience than themselves." *

This early exercise of discipline, and the invariable testimony of Methodist experience, from Wesley's times to our own, show the essential importance of Class-Meetings to the continued existence and prosperity of this vital part of Methodist organization. Indeed, the entire institution of

* J. Wesley's Works, vol. ii., p. 63.

lay preaching in Methodism is inseparable from the Class-Meeting. In the Class the elements of the institution first put forth their life. There each Preacher's Christian character takes its distinctive features and rises into maturity. There the spiritual gifts and graces for his work unfold themselves ; and there, from week to week, he gathers materials for the pulpit from the reflected and re-reflected experience of Christians from amidst varieties of circumstance and conditions in life. There the practical and the contemplative, the outspoken and the timid, the tempted, the afflicted, the world-beset disciples come, and give him the advantage of the weekly lessons which God's providence and grace have taught them. It is from this school of training that Methodist Local Preachers gather the life, the power, the aptness to teach, and the variety and warmth which so mark them, and make them the most successful body of Lay Preachers which, perhaps, the Christian world has ever known. To dissolve the Class-Meeting would be to break the unity of that body, to scatter its force, to take away the main guard of its purity, to leave its very heart open to corruption, and so, finally to hush its voices and leave its work and its fruits to decay.

The necessary dependence of the entire system of Methodist lay preaching on a faithful observance of the Class-Meeting, assumes greater importance in relation to the prosperity of Methodism, when that system is viewed as the school of supply for the ranks of the regular Ministry. As no candidate for Local Preacher's work can be received on trial, unless he comes as an accredited member of a Class in which he has diligently used the privilege of fellowship in the culture of personal piety, giving good proof of a sound conversion, and of sincere and ardent devotion to Christ by a zealous exercise of His hallowed gifts ; so, no candidate for the stated Ministry can be admitted to examination unless he come fully accredited as a Local

Preacher, and as such, for a reasonable time, has consistently exemplified "the fruits of the Spirit," proved the purity and power of his zeal by an unreserved employment of his energies in every open field of usefulness, and has been successful in his efforts to save souls. It is required that these evidences of grace, gifts, and fruit, on his part, be attested by the Quarterly Meeting of the Circuit to which he belongs; a meeting composed of Class-Leaders who can testify to his diligent and successful use of his weekly Class, of Preachers whose experience and practice have prepared them for estimating his fitness for the work, and, indeed, those members of the Societies and congregations among whom he has laboured, whose religious intelligence, hallowed wisdom, and spiritual discernment most qualify them for judging of his Christian character, and call to the work of the Ministry. Nor without the full vote of such a meeting can the Superintendent Minister place him before the authorized ministerial committees for examination. In the case of each candidate the Conference requires from the Minister who recommends him a written character so distinct and full as to leave no doubt with respect to his faithfulness during his term of membership; and so embodying the testimony of those in communion with whom he has proved his knowledge of the religion he is to preach, as to be worthy of a place among Connexional records.

The Class-Meeting is held to be essential still when candidates are accepted and received for training in the Theological Institutions. All students are to meet in Class under the oversight of the College Governor. Having had a distinct character given to their Christian experience under the weekly discipline of the Class from the time of their conversion, it is taken as essential to their preparation for the pastoral work of Methodism, and especially for spiritual intercourse with the Societies in quarterly visitations, and a religious oversight of the Classes in conjunction

with the Leaders, that they should have all the means of continuous spiritual culture which the Class-Meeting can afford them during their College probation. There can be no other means of effectually watching over their heart-interests and of keeping up their religious life to a standard consistent with the holy design of their future Ministry. Such are the peculiar trials, temptations, and dangers of a student's course, especially in what may be called College life, that it is sometimes hard to keep the advancing intellect in harmony with the hallowed will and affections, with all the gracious aid which mutual watchfulness, instruction, and prayer supply. Without such, is it, generally, possible ?

“ Woe to him whose spirits droop,
To him who falls, alone !
He has none to lift him up,
To help his weakness on.”

Methodist College life will fully answer its design and prepare a Ministry which shall fulfil the original purpose of Methodism, only while its studies are pursued in proper connection with the spirit of earnest devotion to Christ, and the full enjoyment of Christian brotherly intercourse and mutual edification ; only while those who are in training can, in the diligent use of Methodist means, sing from week to week as their fathers sang,—

“ Whate'er Thou dost on one bestow,
Let each the double blessing know ;
Let each the common burden bear ;
In comforts and in griefs agree ;
And wrestle for his friends with Thee,
In all the' omnipotence of prayer.”

The whole body of Methodist Ministers, whether they have undergone College training, or whether by personal culture their original powers have been matured in their *distinctiveness*, without exception, take their position and

keep it under most sacred obligation to that peculiar institution, the Class-Meeting, in which every man's "first love" gave out its earliest expression ; where it was cherished, and where it was brought fully to hallow the gifts now consecrated to the Ministry. The true Methodist "*company* of the preachers" owe their place and life, under the Spirit, to the Class-Meeting. With the Class-Meeting that company will stand or fall. While the Ministry, like the people draws its life from the springs which Christian communion keeps open, it will be a "ministry of reconciliation." But if the old springs of Methodism be closed, whence shall its Ministry gather strength for its calling ? Whence, rather, shall a living Ministry continue to rise ? "If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do ?"

How would Methodism without its Class discipline be certified of its new births ? and without evidences of renewed life among its people, how can it be assured of spiritual qualifications for its Ministry ? How or from whence, indeed, can it have its Ministry at all ? its converted, its spiritual Ministry, its Ministry equal to its design of spreading scriptural holiness over the land and of saving the world for Christ ? To trace the relation of the Class-Meeting to the Methodist Ministry is to see its essential importance to the prosperity of Methodism. To whatever extent the prosperity of Methodism is dependent upon its subordinate agencies, it must ever owe the depth, breadth, permanency and germinant power of its success mainly to the stated Ministry. If its true prosperity is the widening spread of Scriptural holiness, the standard of sanctifying truth must ever be kept clearly and fully before the people ; the doctrines of salvation must be intelligently and accurately expounded and enforced. The standard of truth must be the same amidst all varieties of Ministerial gift. The doctrine proclaimed everywhere must be one. The voices must agree. The testimonies must accord.

There must be unity of aim, diligence in utilizing results, regularity of pastoral action, order in teaching, careful oversight, intelligent and affectionate rule. All this requires unreserved dedication to Ministerial work on the part of those who are called to it by the Head of the Church.

“ Wherefore He saith, when He ascended up on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. (Now that He ascended, what is it but that He also descended first into the lower parts of the earth. He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that He might fill all things.) And He gave some, apostles ; and some, prophets ; and some, evangelists ; and some, pastors and teachers ; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ : till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ. That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive ; but speaking the truth in love, may grow up into Him in all things, which is the head, even Christ : from whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.”*

Now as the Lord Jesus is pleased to carry out His gracious and holy purposes concerning the Church and the world by means of evangelists, pastors, and teachers, called out of the world and set apart as His under shepherds; it is evident that those who have been raised up by Him with the design of spreading His holy religion will owe the fulness and steadfastness of their success to the steady and faithful action of a

* Ephesians iv. 8—16.

divinely called and qualified Ministry. So it must be with Methodism. And if the Methodist Ministry is necessary to the accomplishment of Methodist purposes ; if that Ministry fulfils its purpose just as its holy character accords with its holy design ; if the character of the Ministry has accorded with its holy design only as the result of faithfulness to Methodist discipline and rule ; if that part of Methodist discipline which has been most effective and fruitful in the formation of ministerial character is found in its rule of weekly fellowship or Class-Meeting ; then, the devout and diligent use of that rule of fellowship is necessary to the fulfilment of the design for which Methodist Preachers were raised up by God. In Methodism, if no Class, no effective spiritual training ; if no effective spiritual training, no generation of qualified Local Preachers ; if no Local Preachers, no tried candidates for the stated Ministry ; if no candidates, no succession of Ministers ; if no succession of Ministers, no continuation of Methodist life. The Methodist design fails.

Another agency of Methodism, and one of vital and growing importance is that of its Leaders. According to the excellent preface to authorized Class-Books, "next in point of importance to faithful, laborious Preachers, are lively, active, judicious Class-Leaders, for usefulness in the Methodist Connexion." Their office and duties are defined by Mr. Wesley. As with other parts of Methodist organization, the Leader's place owes its definite shaping to the pressure of circumstances in its early history.

On the 24th of March, 1771, Mr. Wesley "reached Dublin early on Sunday morning. Landing at the quay," he says, "I walked straight to the New Room, very well, (blessed be God!) and very hungry. I immediately set myself to inquire into the state of the Society in Dublin. It was plain there had been a continual jar for at least two years last past, which had stumbled the people, weakened the hands of the

Preachers, and greatly hindered [the work of God]. I wanted to know the ground of this ; and that I might do nothing rashly, determined to hear the parties, separately first, and then face to face. Having already talked with the Preachers, I talked this evening with the Leaders at large. . . . On Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, I visited the Classes, and found a general faintness had run through the Society. . . . On Wednesday evening I read over to the Leaders the following paper :—

“ 1. That it may be more easily discerned whether the members of our Societies are working out their own salvation, they are divided into little companies called Classes. One person in each of these is styled the Leader. It is his business, (1) To see each person in his Class once a week ; to inquire how their souls prosper ; to advise, reprove, comfort or exhort them, (2) To receive what they are willing to give toward the expenses of the Society, and (3) To meet the Assistant [Superintendent] and the Stewards once a week.

“ 2. This is the whole and sole business of a Leader, or any number of Leaders. But it is common for the Assistant in any place when several Leaders are met together, to ask their advice, as to any thing that concerns either the temporal or spiritual welfare of, the Society. This he may or he may not do, as he sees best. I frequently do it in the larger Societies ; and on many occasions I have found, that in a multitude of counsellors there is safety.

“ 3. From this short view of the original design of Leaders it is easy to answer the following questions :

“(1.) What authority has a single Leader ?

“ He has authority to meet his Class, to receive their contributions, and to visit the sick in his Class.

“ (2.) What authority have all the Leaders of a Society met together ?

“ *They have authority to show their Class-papers to the*

Assistant, to deliver the money they have received to the Stewards, and to bring in the names of the sick.

“(3.) But have they not authority to restrain the Assistant, if they think he acts improperly ?

“No more than any member of the Society has. After mildly speaking to him, they are to refer the thing to Mr. W.

“(4.) Have they not authority to hinder a person from preaching ?

“None but the Assistant has this authority.

“(5.) Have they not authority to displace a particular Leader ?

“No more than the door-keeper has. To place and to displace Leaders belongs to the Assistant alone.

“(6.) Have they not authority to expel a particular member of the Society ?

“No : the Assistant only can do this.

“(7.) But have they not authority to regulate the temporal and spiritual affairs of the Society ?

“Neither the one nor the other. Temporal affairs belong to the Stewards ; spiritual to the Assistant.

“(8.) Have they authority to make any collection of a public nature ?

“No : the Assistant only can do this.

“(9.) Have they authority to receive the yearly subscription ?

“No : this also belongs to the Assistant.

“4. Considering these things, can we wonder at the confusion which has been here for some years ? If one wheel of a machine gets out of its place, what disorder must ensue !”*

This interesting paper affords an insight into the early agitations which, here and there threatened, for a time, to disturb the infant organization of Methodism. The questions which Mr. Wesley was called to settle in Dublin were

* *J. Wesley's Works*, vol. iii., pp. 425—428.

not peculiar perhaps to that side of the channel ; but were settled authoritatively there for the benefit of the Societies everywhere. The paper is still more important, however, as showing how the most essential parts of the Methodist machinery were originally fitted into one another, how necessarily dependent they are upon each other, and how vitally their movements depend upon the integrity of the Class-Meeting. The necessity of the Class-Meeting springs from the spiritual necessities of the Society ; and the office of Leader springs out of the necessity of the Class-Meeting.

The design of the Society, the spread of Scriptural holiness, could not, it was found, be carried out unless the members were earnestly and unanimously working out their own salvation in obedience to the Society's rules. It could not be "easily discerned" by the pastors whether the members were doing this without the division of large numbers into companies small enough to allow mutual watchfulness and efficient oversight on the part of one qualified to "advise, reprove, comfort, and exhort" each and all "once at least in the week." So, if the purposes of the Society are to be fulfilled, the members must hold together in the use of the best adapted means, and be faithful to their Leader, as well as to one another. They and their Leader are mutually dependent and mutually responsible. Their spiritual relation to each other is close, so close that their spiritual welfare is one. If the Leader be unfaithful to his Class, the Class fails, the meeting is vain ; if the members be unfaithful to the Leader, his office is vain. "It will appear to be a matter of very great importance to the Methodist Connexion," says an authorized address, "that caution should be used in putting men into this office ; and that they ought to be men of sterling piety, of a good natural understanding, and of solid judgment. It will be utterly impossible for them to fill their places properly, without the love of God in their hearts, as a sacred fire inflaming them with holy zeal for His glory and the

salvation of souls ; nor can they be expected to discharge their duty well any longer than they retain this principle in their own breasts. It is equally certain that they should be men capable of advising their brethren properly when in difficulties, of distinguishing truth from falsehood, and temptation from sin ; that they ought to be well acquainted with the human heart, with the devices of Satan, and with the work of the Holy Spirit ; and that they should be persons of *influence* arising from religion, such as eminently pious men are likely to have in Christian society, if possessed of a good intellectual capacity.

" No public ministrations will be sufficient to maintain the life of religion in individuals, or to preserve the purity of the body, without faithful Leaders in the Society. The hedge of discipline cannot be kept up, nor proper order be enforced, without the aid of Leaders. But this aid cannot be expected from them, unless they be men of God. If they be not strictly and universally conscientious, they will not help their Preachers to urge the observance of our Rules. Or, if their own experience be superficial, how can they be expected to set before their brethren the deep things of God, or excite them to go on to perfect holiness ?

" But it has been asked, Are all our Leaders such as are above described ? Have they now fellowship with the Father and His Son Jesus Christ ? Are they all pressing toward the mark of entire holiness ? Blessed be God, many of them not only answer to this character, but are happy witnesses that the blood of Christ cleanseth from all sin, and can say to their brethren, ' Be ye followers of us, as we are of Christ.' " *

It cannot be too frequently repeated, though it is hoped that the language has become happily familiar to every man and woman who has received a Class-book, " No public

* " Cautions and Directions addressed to Class-Leaders." Class-Book, pp. 10, 11.

ministrations will be sufficient to maintain the life of religion in individuals, or to preserve the purity of the body without faithful Leaders. . . . The hedge of discipline cannot be kept up, nor proper order be enforced, without the aid of Leaders." But from whence shall these be drawn? Where shall be found men and women of sufficient intelligence, discernment, knowledge of themselves and of God's will, of adequate judgment, zeal, cheerful devotion and agreeable address? They must come from the ranks. They must be trained members. "One person in each of these classes," says Mr. Wesley, "is styled the Leader." The Leader must be one preferred from among the members as most exemplary in the pursuit of the Methodist design, "Scriptural holiness;" most diligent, most observant of rule, most experienced in piety, most unreserved and unselfish in purpose; in all things an exemplar Methodist, willing to spend and be spent in leading Methodists towards their own standard of holiness.

Many such Leaders have been raised up in Methodism. Many thousands of such still live to bless the Church of their fathers and to leaven the social life around them. But, under Divine grace, they have all been the fruit of Class-Meetings. In the Class they drew their first spiritual breath; there they have been nourished; and, if the agency of Methodist Leaders has been a benefit to the Church and the world; if their example and labours have sustained and spread pure spiritual life in the Church; those who enjoy the blessings, owe them, under God, to the institution of the Class-Meeting. And if the Church and the world are not to lose the healthful and holy impulses by which the purity and happiness of human life have been so graciously and so powerfully advanced, the remarkable succession of Methodist Leaders must be kept up, the Methodist Class-Meeting must remain a necessity, an *essential means* to the great, the indispensable end of Methodism.

Can Methodism, can the Christian Church, afford to lose the influence, the power, of such an embodiment of spiritual gifts and graces as lives in the agency of Methodist Class-Leaders ? No, never !

Important, however, as the office of Leader is, in relation to the Class-Meeting, or to the distinctive life of the Methodist Societies, Mr. Wesley puts the agency of Methodist Stewards before that of Leaders. "In the Methodist discipline," says he, "the wheels regularly stand thus : the Assistant, the Preachers, the Stewards, the Leaders, the people."*

"The office of the Lay Assistant is, in the absence of the Minister, (1) To expound every morning and evening. (2) To meet the united Society, the Bands, the select Society, and the penitents once a week. (3) To visit the Classes once a quarter. (4) To hear and decide all differences. (5) To put the disorderly back on trial, and to receive on trial for the Bands or Society. (6) To see that the Stewards, the Leaders and the Schoolmasters faithfully discharge their several offices. (7) To meet the Leaders of the Bands and Classes weekly, and the Stewards, and to overlook their accounts.

"Long before we were led to accept of Lay Assistants, I felt the weight of a far different care, namely, care of temporal things. The quarterly subscriptions amounted, at a mean computation, to above three hundred pounds a year. This was to be laid out, partly in repairs, partly in other necessary expenses, and partly in paying debts. The weekly contributions fell little short of eight pounds a week ; which was to be distributed as every one had need. And I was expected to take thought for all these things. But it was a burden I was not able to bear ; so I chose out first one, then four, and after a time seven, as prudent men as I knew, and desired them to take charge of these things upon themselves, that I might have no encumbrance of this kind.

* J. Wesley's Works, vol. iii., p. 428.

"The business of these Stewards is, to manage the temporal things of the Society, to receive the subscriptions and contributions, to expend what is needful from time to time. To send relief to the poor. To keep an exact account of all receipts and expenses. To inform the Minister if any of the rules of the Society are not punctually observed. To tell the Preachers in love, if they think any thing amiss either in their doctrine or life.

"The rules of the Stewards are : 1. Be frugal. Save every thing that can be saved honestly. 2. Spend no more than you receive. Contract no debts. 3. Have no long accounts. Pay everything within the week. 4. Give none that asks relief either an ill word or an ill look. Do not hurt them if you cannot help. 5. Expect no thanks from men.

* * * * *

"I soon had the pleasure to find that all these temporal things were done with the utmost faithfulness and exactness ; so that my cares of this kind were at an end."*

It is instructive to observe how the various agencies of Methodism arose under the call of circumstances. Each agency seemed to appear in readiness for its task, as soon as the demand for its labour was made. Whether the office had respect to the more spiritual or the more temporal part of Methodist work, each seemed to rise into life, and shape itself to its position, just as it was needed to keep up or accelerate the action which was to work out the Methodist design. The action of Methodist Stewards was to have respect chiefly to the temporalities of the Society ; but those temporalities were religious ; and the necessity for their regulated management was consequent on the voluntary contributions which formed a part of the weekly service of the Class-Meeting. Nor could the office of Steward be filled by any who was not, by devout observance of the

* J. Wesley's Works, vol. viii., pp. 261, 262.

rules, familiar with Class-Meeting discipline. A Steward must be a member of the Society. One whose Christian character has been proved in the course of his weekly fellowship with his Class-mates. The duties of his office in relation to the Preachers, to the Leaders, and to the members required this. He was responsible as the adviser, if need be, of the Preachers, and as the guardian of Methodist claims on the members for consistent conformity to discipline. The instructions given to the London Stewards show how closely their office bound them to all the means of spiritual culture, and how necessarily their duties were associated with the distinctive ordinances of Methodist fellowship.

“ 1. You are to be men full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom that you may do all things in a manner acceptable to God.

“ 2. You are to be present every Tuesday and Thursday morning in order to transact the temporal affairs of the Society.

“ 3. You are to begin and end every meeting with earnest prayer unto God, for a blessing on all your undertakings.

“ 4. You are to produce your accounts the first Tuesday in every month that they may be transcribed into the ledger.

“ 5. You are to take it in turn, month by month, to be chairman. The chairman is to see that all the rules be punctually observed, and immediately to check him who breaks any of them.

“ 6. You are to do nothing without the consent of the Minister, either actually had or reasonably presumed.

“ 7. You are to consider whenever you meet, ‘God is here.’ Therefore be deeply serious: utter no trifling word: speak as in His presence, and to the glory of His great Name.

“ 8. When anything is debated, let one at once stand up and speak, the rest giving attention. And let him speak

just loud enough to be heard, in love and in the spirit of meekness.

“ 9. You are continually to pray and endeavour that a holy harmony of soul may in all things subsist among you ; that in every step you may ‘ keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.’

“ 10. In all debates, you are to watch over your spirits, avoiding, as fire, all clamour and contention ; being ‘ swift to hear, slow to speak ;’ in honour every man preferring another before himself.

“ 11. If you cannot relieve, do not grieve the poor ; give them soft words if nothing else ; abstain from either sour looks or harsh words. Let them be glad to come, even though they should go empty away. Put yourself in the place of every poor man ; and deal with him as you would God should deal with you.

“ These instructions we whose names are under-written (being the present Stewards of the Society at London) do heartily receive, and earnestly desire to conform to. In witness whereof we have set our hands.

“ N.B.—If any Steward shall break any of the preceding rules, after having been thrice admonished by the chairman (whereof notice is to be immediately given the Minister), he is no longer Steward.”*

Blessed men ! Happy Stewards !

“ Meek, simple followers of the Lamb,
They lived, and spake, and thought the same.”

Even money transactions in their hands became holy work. The spirituality of their aim and the unselfishness of their motives made their carnal things fit consistently into the holy plans of the Society. In their duties, the temporal melted into the spiritual. The sweet harmony of all these working agencies of early Methodism seems like a

* J. Wesley's Works, vol. ii., pp. 58, 59.

repetition of that primitive unity of Christian action, in which the "service of tables" and the "ministry of the word and prayer," the "daily ministrations" to the needy, and the "teaching," the "breaking of bread" and the brotherly "fellowship," were seen and felt to be interlocked, and in such unison as to be essentially one in spirit, aim, movement and result. Nor can the mutual dependance of Methodist agencies upon one another ever be broken while Methodists breathe the spirit of their fathers, and faithfully work out the plans which their fathers so happily suited to their holy design. Methodist Stewardship, as Methodism has enlarged, may be divided into several departments, for the more convenient transaction of business ; there may be the Circuit Stewards, the Society Stewards, and the Stewards of the Poor's Fund ; but their necessary relation to the Class-Meeting, as the distinctive spiritual institution of the Society, remains as close as ever ; and can never be dissolved but in the dissolution of the body itself. Circuit Stewards act for the Circuit ; but their action continues only while Society Stewards act ; Society Stewards can act only in dependance on the action of the Leaders ; on the Leaders the Stewards for the poor depend for opportunity of fulfilling their office ; and Leaders can act only while they have members in their Classes, and those members are faithful to the spirit, order and design of the Class-Meeting. Indeed, all the parts of the Methodist machine must work together if Methodist work is to continue. For one action to cease is for all to be deranged ; and to break up that which is most essential to its spiritual power, would be to leave the broken organization powerless for the accomplishment of its design. Mr. Wesley's record respecting a temporary derangement of the Methodist machinery in Dublin, is deeply instructive, and seems to be left to his followers as a solemn admonition.

"If one wheel of a machine gets out of its place, what

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disorder must ensue ! In the Methodist discipline, the wheels regularly stand thus : The Assistant, the Preachers, the Stewards, the Leaders, the people. But here the Leaders were got quite out of their place. . . To this, chiefly, I impute the gradual decay of the work of God in Dublin. There has been a jar throughout the whole machine. Most of the wheels were hindered in their motion. The Stewards, the Preachers, the Assistant, all moved heavily. They felt all was not right. But if they saw where the fault lay, they had not strength to remedy it. But it may be effectually remedied now. Without rehearsing former grievances, (which may all die and be forgotten,) for the time to come, let each wheel keep its own place. Let the Assistant, the Preachers, the Stewards, the Leaders, know and execute their several offices. Let none encroach upon another. But all move together in harmony and love. So shall the work of God flourish among you, perhaps as it never did before ; while you all hold ‘the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.’ ”*

* J. Wesley’s Works, vol. iii., p. 428.

CHAPTER VII.

*Other Agencies of Methodism in their Relation to
the Class-Meeting.*

To visit the sick, the afflicted and the needy is a Christian duty and privilege. It does not belong exclusively to the Pastor, the Leader, or any one formally set apart to such work ; it is a part of practical Christianity, and is necessary to the completion of the Christian character. “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.” “As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.”* So shall it be said to us at the last, “Come, ye blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world : for I was an hungry, and ye gave Me meat : I was thirsty, and ye gave Me drink : I was a Stranger, and ye took Me in : naked, and ye clothed Me : I was sick, and ye visited Me : I was in prison, and ye came unto Me. . . . Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these My brethren, ye have done it unto Me.”†

Just as this Christ-like work has entered into the activities of a Christian’s life, has that life been happy and spiritually prosperous. The loving performance of the duty has had present reward in a growing meetness for reward in the future. The spirit and practice of this duty has entered largely into the action of Methodism. “It is expected of all who continue in these Societies that they should

* James i. 27 ; Galatians vi. 10. † St. Matthew xxv. 34—40.

continue to evidence their desire of salvation by doing good, by being in every kind merciful after their power, as they have opportunity ; doing good of every possible sort, and as far as is possible to all men : to their bodies, of the ability that God giveth, by giving food to the hungry, by clothing the naked, by helping or visiting them that are sick or in prison : to their souls, by instructing, *reproving*, or exhorting all we have any intercourse with ; trampling under foot that enthusiastic doctrine of devils, that ‘we are not to do good, unless *our hearts be free to it.*’”—This rule is founded on the principle, that as Christian Societies the Methodists would answer their calling only so far as they cultivated and exemplified the mind of Christ. As a rule, therefore, it was among the questions which the Class-Meeting afforded its Members and its Leader an opportunity of mutually pressing on one another. But like the primitive Church, Methodism soon organized an agency set apart for the work of stated ministrations to the sick and needy ; so as to supply, if possible, the deficiency of private Christian effort.

“ It was not long,” says Mr. Wesley, “ before the Stewards found a great difficulty with regard to the sick. Some were ready to perish before they knew of their illness ; and when they did know, it was not in their power (being persons generally employed in trade) to visit them so often as they desired.

“ When I was apprised of this, I laid the case at large before the whole Society ; showed how impossible it was for the stewards to attend all that were sick in all parts of the town ; desired the Leaders of classes would more carefully inquire, and more constantly inform them, who were sick ; and asked, ‘ Who among you is willing, as well as able, to supply this lack of service ? ’

“ The next morning many willingly offered themselves. *I chose six and forty of them, whom I judged to be of the*

most tender, loving spirit ; divided the town into twenty-three parts, and desired two of them to visit the sick in each division.

“ It is the business of a Visitor of the sick, to see every sick person within his district thrice a week. To inquire into the state of their souls, and to advise them as occasion may require. To inquire into their disorders, and procure advice for them. To relieve them if they are in want. To do anything for them, which he (or she) can do. To bring in his accounts weekly to the Stewards.

“ Upon reflection, I saw how exactly, in this also, we had copied after the primitive Church. What were the ancient Deacons? What was Phebe the Deaconess, but such a Visitor of the sick ?

“ I did not think it needful to give them any particular rules, besides these that follow :—

“ 1. Be plain and open in dealing with souls. 2. Be mild, tender, patient. 3. Be cleanly in all you do for the sick. 4. Be not nice.

“ We have ever since had great reason to praise God for His continued blessing on this undertaking. Many lives have been saved, many sicknesses healed, much pain and want prevented or removed. Many heavy hearts have been made glad, many mourners comforted : and the Visitors have found from Him Whom they serve, a present reward for all their labour.”*

Here is the origin of that wide-spread agency which, under various names, has continued to deepen the spiritual life of Methodism, while it has been giving practical expression to its warm sympathies with suffering humanity. This mode of charitable action is quiet, retiring and comparatively unobserved, but it is not among the least powerful movements in the work of diffusing truth, and drawing the world to Christ. Saving truth given out by such an

* *J. Wesley's Works*, vol. viii., p. 263.

agency is "like leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened." And how often is it that it is the woman who has most to do with spiritually leavening the masses which need quickening grace and Divine comfort ! The woman is often the best Visitor, the purest and noblest type of that agency which "seeks in order to save that which was lost." The Gospel by such an agency works silently by an assimilating process, and quietly changes suffering and sinful humanity, and makes it, amidst hallowed affliction, a "partaker of the Divine nature." Methodism owes much of its richest and most permanent prosperity to this work of visitation. The six and forty Visitors appointed by Mr. Wesley in London, have been followed throughout the land by a long succession of holy workers, in the same line, though under various titles and in different divisions of labour. Benevolent Societies, Strangers' Friend Societies, Clothing Charities, Bible Readers, Tract-Distributors, Lay Missionaries, both men and women, are all groups of the same family, sprung from the same Methodist stock, and agreed to work out in different departments the same original principle of visitation to the sick, afflicted, and needy, who are beyond the range of the ordinary services of the Church. Methodism still holds to the principle that the work of such Visitors is so far spiritual as to require in those who undertake it spiritual life and spiritual gifts equal to the duty. Like the first staff of Visitors, they are called to deal with the souls as well as the bodies of those whom they visit ; and have to work on experience, to exercise graces, and to exemplify a zeal which belong exclusively to decidedly renewed and devoted Christians.

If any thing distinguishes this agency in Methodism it is its clearly defined object, the true conversion and sanctification of the souls to whom it ministers, and the warm, prayerful, and untiring zeal with which that object is pur-

sued. It is not enough to seek the lost, to find them out, to look at their condition and deplore it ; but to save them, and to give them all the benefit of oneness with "the household of faith." The Priest may come down that way, and see, and pass by on the other side. And likewise the Levite, when at the place, may come and look, and pass by on the other side ; but the Samaritan must see, and have compassion, and bind up the wounds, pour in oil and wine, provide a refuge, and see to it, as far as he can, that the saved sufferer has a place for rest and healing.

The difference in result between the simple, unpretending, but warm-hearted and direct ministration of the plain Visitor, and the cold, mechanical utterance of sacramental forms, or "services for the sick," shows the vital importance of visiting for a set spiritual purpose, under the constraint of pure and unselfish love for redeemed souls. The true Samaritan character can be formed only in heartfelt companionship with Him who said, "Go, and do thou likewise." And the true Samaritan's work will be permanently fruitful only as far as he realizes the benefit of spiritual fellowship with kindred spirits, and labours by rule, with the fixed purpose of gathering the fruit into the garners of the Church.

The plan of sending forth Visitors, Readers, or Lay-missionaries into dense or scattered populations, binding them to avoid offence to any, not only by keeping themselves from professed fellowship with any particular church, but by carefully abstaining from attempts to bring converts under any particular church discipline ; may have some advantages as a mode of keeping up a Gospel testimony among loose masses ; and here and there a seed among the handfuls so indiscriminately scattered, may strike root in the cleft of some wild rock, struggle bravely up into the sunshine, and even cover its neglected birth-place with the beauties of vegetation. But generally such missions as

make no provision for the regulated culture of the Visitors' piety, or for gathering and preserving the fruit of their labour by well-ordered means of Christian fellowship, prove but loose and fleeting and unsatisfactory in their results. Stray souls must not only be sought for and saved, but brought into the fold, that they may be nourished in wholesome pasture, and so trained to holy familiarity with their Divine Shepherd, as to be for ever redeemed from the love of that world out of which they were taken. Such work is done with the most certain success, and its fruit accumulates and diffuses itself most steadily and continuously when it is done by a Church which provides the best arranged and most vigorous means for the spiritual training and culture of its Visitors.

Methodist Visitors must be members of the Society. As members they have the advantage of the Class-Meeting. The weekly use of such a means of spiritual intercourse with their fellow-disciples and their Leader secures to them that kind of discipline, that opportunity of perfecting spiritual discernment, of gathering experience of human nature in itself, and in its relation to Divine grace, and of becoming familiar with the modes of the Holy Spirit's work on human souls, which, of all schools of preparation for work like theirs, has proved most adapted and efficient.

And the history of Methodist Home-Missionary work, in any one of its branches, will show that those who have undertaken it, have been steady or wavering, vigorous or weak, fresh or flagging, cheerful or depressed, happy and honoured in their toil, or uneasy and unfruitful, just as they have been faithful or unfaithful in the use of their Class-Meeting. The man or woman who attempts to do the spiritual work of Methodism in the personal neglect of Methodist discipline, or who fails, after a time, to sustain the strength for labour by the joys of Christian communion, *will have to say in sorrow at last, amidst tokens of failure,*

"They made me the keeper of the vineyards ; but mine own vineyard have I not kept."

But while a devout enjoyment of the Class-Meeting must be held essential to the prosperity of Methodist missionary visitation as it regards the continuous qualification of the Visitors, it is equally necessary to the preservation of the results on the part of those to whom the efforts of the Visitors have brought Divine blessing. Indeed, judging from results as well as from the nature of the case, without the use of such means as Class-Meetings most suitably afford, the fruits of missionary visitation and labour, however encouraging they may be for a time, will, in most cases, soon die out, leaving the work to be begun again.

One who has had large opportunity of estimating the importance of Methodist discipline in its influence on those who have been sought out and rescued from the deepest retreats of vice and misery, and who has therefore a right to speak, gives us the benefit of his observation and experience, and wisely remarks that "New converts, even though their outward condition be favourable to their stability, are in the utmost need of the counsels and aids of experience, and are always ready to grasp at them when offered. It has been supposed from certain observations, that 'under many circumstances the magnetic needle, even after the disturbing influence has been removed, will continue wavering, and require many days before it points aright, and remains steady to the pole. So is it ordinarily with the soul, after it has begun to free itself from the disturbing forces of the flesh and the world, and to turn itself towards God.' And not only so ; but there is always a danger lest while the affections are settling into habits of steady exercise towards God, they should be again warped by the action of those 'disturbing forces' from which they had begun to be released. The magnitude of this danger in the case of uneducated people who had previously lived

in open vice, and whose conversion has been comparatively sudden, it is scarcely possible to over-estimate. In all such cases there is a terrible liability to defection ; and great is the Church's responsibility for the use of suitable means to preserve from it. Not only must the excitement under which the great change has been produced, and by which the soul may for a time be sustained in its conflict with evil, gradually subside, but unless duly watched against and withstood, a reaction will set in, under the influence of old worldly and sinful associations, with the most deadly force and rapidity. Let no one say that if the change is Divinely wrought and real, it must be lasting. The condition of the Church of Corinth at least, not to adduce the apostacies in the Churches of Galatia, and not to urge the probability that the persons described in the Epistle to the Hebrews (Chap. vi.) as having so fallen away that it was impossible to ' renew them again unto repentance,' included some of the three thousand who were converted on the day of Pentecost, ought to be enough to show how unauthorized and fallacious is the notion that converted men can never turn again to the 'old sins' from which they had been 'purged.'

"According to the teaching of the New Testament, new converts are as 'little children,' feeble, impulsive, and very liable to go wrong ; and it is the imperative duty of the Church to take them under its most tender vigilance and care ; to use every available means to nourish the new life on which they have entered ; to instruct, educate, and discipline them, and as far as possible shield them from the assaults of evil.

"For all these purposes, I believe no institution of modern times has been found so directly efficacious as the Class-Meeting. To the most advanced Christian, an institution so naturally tending to promote brotherly love and confidence, to lead to habits of self-examination, and to call forth sympathy and prayer one for another, cannot but be highly advantageous. But its value to "babes" in Christ, and to

anxious inquirers after salvation, as a help to their steadfastness, or as a means of encouragement and guidance, is inestimable. This it would be easy to prove by an induction of facts supplied by the experience of now more than a hundred years.” *

An illustration of these remarks, and, indeed, an illustrative proof of the essential importance of the institution for which the writer pleads, especially in reference to the preservation of the faithful Visitor’s spiritual children, may be drawn from Mr. Briggs’ beautiful story of “Chequer Alley.” It is the story of Miss Macarthy’s toils as a Visitor among the poorest and most wretched of a city population. The character of the woman had been formed for her work under the gracious discipline of Methodism. Constrained by the love of Christ, she devoted herself to the work of house to house visitation. It was not for her to *boast in another’s line of things made ready to her hand*; but she broke into previously untrodden ground, and pushed her way with her message of mercy into “regions beyond.” For two years, at least, she persevered without any signs of success, in companionship with two or three like-minded women. Supplied with tracts, they went from house to house, and amidst filth, squalor and disease, unblushing vice, laughing impudence, rude assaults, blasphemy, drunkenness, and licentious abominations, she went to and fro, like an angel of mercy amidst a population of fifteen thousand souls, and through a “network of connected alleys and courts; for many years the privileged refuge of the outcast and degraded; the haunt of intemperance, dissoluteness, and crime; a sort of lodgment for many of the waifs and strays that float on the great sea, and wander about the broad ways of London life.”

One evening after two years toil, with little or nothing to cheer them, they had gathered a rude company in a wretched

* *Briggs’ “Chequer Alley,” pp. 39—41.*

room adjoining the abode of a savage rat-catcher and his savage wife. At the close of the service Miss Macarthy said that she would have an after meeting. " You have heard of conversions," said she, " and such a thing as new life, and peace with God : I and my sisters have known that these things are real, and if you will stay a little while, we will tell you how we know it ; but as we are women, we should like to have only women to speak to."

" No, you won't, though ; " was the sharp reply of some young men, " if you turn us out, nobody else shall hear."

" Very well, " said the brave woman, " stay, as many of you as choose."

They sat down ; and then earnest women told the story of their conversion. It was a simple tale from each in turn. It was a kind of Class-Meeting in the presence of a sinful audience. But the Holy Ghost spoke through these prophetesses. One of them prayed. There was deep silence, a strange sense of awe ; then undertones of convulsive feeling, whisperings of prayer, and at last smothered cries of distress. When they rose from their knees, there were looks of bewilderment, and every one asked another " What's the matter ? " Matter ! It was a little Pentecost. Twenty at least that Sunday night, twenty of the vilest and worst, cried for mercy, and found it. The women had long gone forth " weeping, bearing precious seed," and now they were " come again rejoicing, bringing their sheaves with them." Now was seen the value of the Methodist Class-Meeting. Its necessity was soon felt. It was fairly tried. And the result has been chronicled after more than twenty years of faithful obedience to the Methodist rules. One Class-Meeting held on a Sunday afternoon in that once dark but now rapidly brightening alley, is a type of many such during the years through which Miss Macarthy acted as Leader to a succession of at least five hundred converts.

The meeting "is held in a room occupied by one of the

members, a widow, whose husband died in the Lord on the bed which you will find on your left. You climb two steep and narrow staircases, and opening the door at the top find yourself in the presence of about fifteen or sixteen persons, two or three of them being men. A hymn is sung and prayer offered. The Leader then gives her own testimony in a calm and natural tone. "She knows some of them, what they have to endure. She sympathizes with them, for she too is compassed with infirmity. But it is their common privilege to look to Jesus, Who succours the tempted, and is to all His faithful disciples an Almighty Helper and Guardian.

"The members now speak in turn. The first has been in the Class some years ; and you are hearing the recital, as her very manner and every sentence convince you, of an 'old disciple.' She cannot doubt that she is a child of God, for hers is the Spirit of adoption whereby we cry, Abba, Father. But she is increasingly troubled about her many failures and defects.

"This is substantially the statement of two or three others ; each, however, referring to something peculiar. One in infirm health, says, 'I seem to get on much better when I attend the means of grace ; yet I am never left to myself, in seasons of affliction, when confined to my room.' Another says, 'The strongest desire of my heart is to please God. This I can truly testify ; though too often my conscience tells me I might do better.' Another, in touching simplicity, 'I bless God that I am as happy as I can be. I hope to meet all my dear Class-mates, and you, Mrs. 'Carty in heaven.'

"This last is the utterance of a man a little beyond middle life. Sometime ago he had a son in the Sunday-school, who, after long continued entreaty, succeeded in bringing him to the public service. After this, he came time after time, of his own accord, then began to evince a

consciousness of his state of sin and helplessness, and ultimately obtained a sense of reconciliation to God. For many years he was a sailor, as bold and reckless a man as ever traversed the sea. He now lives in a garret, and is as blithe and happy as the live-long day.

"A poor woman now declares her determination to serve God, and obey her conscience at all hazards. 'But,' she adds, 'nobody knows what I have to suffer. I am single-handed and hedged round with difficulties.' Two years ago she stood with her husband every Sunday morning, where he may still be seen, behind a stall in Whitecross-street. But having been induced to come to the preaching-room on Sunday evenings, she was afterwards solicited to attend morning service at City-road. This she pleaded was impossible; for her husband demanded her assistance at the stall. Would she come if her husband gave consent? demanded her present Leader. Then let her prepare next Sunday, and they would see. The favour was asked in her name, and, though very surlily, was granted. They walked together to the chapel, and there under the sermon she became conscience smitten, and filled with painful solicitude. Returning home, she begged her husband to excuse her future attendance on Sundays at the stall; and in reply to his remonstrance, said she would willingly fast every Sunday to compensate for any loss of custom through her absence. Earnestly seeking, she soon obtained a consciousness of Divine forgiveness; and the words you have just heard represent her present experience.

"The next who speaks is a single woman living with her brother, who declares himself an atheist. She is obliged to say, 'Mine is not a very happy home. I am frequently called hard names because of my connection with the Church, and I fear I am not as forbearing as I ought to be.' She is followed by one who says, 'I am much depressed at times in remembrance of my past life. Forty

years I lived in sin. How wonderful that I should be forgiven ! How thankful I am that I ever came to the room, and afterwards was led to your class !

"A strange history has been that of the young man in the corner, whose turn next it is to speak ! May God preserve him from ever taking a single step in the direction of that which casts so dark a shadow over the past ! Through the blessing of God on the persistent efforts of that saintly woman who is now striving to strengthen him in goodness, he is not only well conducted morally, but has a fair prospect of doing well in the world. Only a year or two ago, however, he was one of the dirtiest, wildest, most ragged, and reckless young fellows in the alley. He speaks modestly, as well he may ! He says, 'I ask the Lord daily that I may die unto sin. Nobody knows how much I love Him ; and shockingly sinful as I have been, I trust that He loves me !'

"There is another to speak,—the mother of the last,—though her name is not inscribed in the book. Indeed she has only attended a few weeks. And the Leader has not deemed it advisable as yet to regard her as even, 'on trial.' She hangs her head and speaks weeping ; and these are her very words : 'The Lord has been very good to me. *I'm much obliged to Him, I am sure !* To think that I, who ought to have been an example to my children, should be first brought here by my own son ! O, I am very sinful ! Can I ever be forgiven ?'

"Each case the reader must suppose to be met by suitable advice, admonition, encouragement, or caution ; and I may now add that the sentences within the marks of quotation are, with one or two exceptions, *verbally* transcribed from notes quietly taken by myself on a casual and unexpected visit."*

The scene thus beautifully sketched is a typical one. It

* Briggs' "Chequer Alley," pp. 44—49.

is but ‘one of a thousand’ that might be culled from the chronicles of Methodism. Since the day when Mr. Wesley sent forth his first Visitors, how many a Miss Macarthy has exemplified his ideal, and shown how possible it is, amidst the greatest difficulties and discouragements, to keep his Visitors’ rules, “Be plain and open in dealing with souls. Be mild, tender, patient.” Unnumbered triumphs, too, have rewarded the “holy women which have laboured in the gospel” from generation to generation, and the grateful thanksgivings have scarcely ceased in one scene of happy toil before they have been repeated in another ; and again the responses have followed, until it has seemed as if Charles Wesley had been inspired to provide songs of victory for the succession of faithful labourers by which the plans of his brother John have been successfully carried out. Over happy changes like those in Chequer Alley Methodism has ever been singing ; and she sings now “as in the days of her youth, and as in the day when she came up out of the land of Egypt.”

“ He hath open’d a door
To the penitent poor,
And rescued from sin,
And admitted the harlots and publicans in.
They have heard the glad sound ;
They have liberty found,
Through the blood of the Lamb,
And plentiful pardon in Jesus’s name.

“ The’ opposers admire
The hammer and fire,
Which all things o’ercomes,
And breaks the hard rocks, and the mountains consumes.
With quiet amaze
They listen and gaze,
And their weapons resign,
Constrain’d to acknowledge—the work is Divine ! ”

What but the discipline so faithfully and affectionately

observed by Miss Macarthy could have held such converts together and have given Christian consistency to their character, so suddenly converted as they were from such scenes and habits of darkness? The spiritual history of the hundreds to whom, through so many years, that good woman gave the benefit of her advice, instruction, sympathy, and prayers in the weekly Class-Meeting will for ever be vocal with testimonies to the blessed necessity of such means of grace. Without these means would the fruit of the Chequer Alley Mission be living as it now is in such gracious and expanding vigour? The Class-Meeting, in association with the saving Word has been the means of permanently reforming and purifying the social and family life of a once dreaded and seemingly hopeless district. The efficacy of such means has been proved in numberless instances of which Mr. Briggs' story gives a fair type; and the efficacy of Class-Meetings in such mission work thus proved, Methodism is bound to the conscientious use of her Class-Meeting, as an essential to her continued success.

Mr. Wesley appears to have struck out the pattern of every Methodist agency which the body of his followers now keep in action. He did not overlook the claims of children and young people. His mind and heart were in the school as well as the pulpit. And it is interesting to watch him sowing the seed which has multiplied into such harvests of good for the children of Methodism. He has recorded the beginning of his educational work in his usual style. "Another thing which had given me frequent concern was, the case of abundance of children. Some their parents could not afford to put to school. So they remained like 'a wild ass's colt.' Others were sent to school, and learned at least to read and write; but they learned all kinds of vice at the same time: so that it had been better for them to have been without their knowledge, than to have bought it at so dear a price.

“ At length I determined to have them taught in my own house, that they might have an opportunity of learning to read, write, and cast accounts (if no more) without being under almost a necessity of learning Heathenism at the same time : and after several unsuccessful trials, I found two such Schoolmasters as I wanted ; men of honesty and of sufficient knowledge, who had talents for, and their hearts in, the work.

“ They have now under their care near sixty children. The parents of some pay for their schooling ; but the greater part being very poor, do not ; so that the expense is chiefly defrayed by voluntary contributions. We have of late clothed them, too, as many as wanted. The rules of the school are these that follow :—No child is admitted under six years of age. All the children are to be present at the morning sermon. They are at school from six to twelve, and from one to five. They have no play days. No child is to speak in school, but to the Masters. The child who misses two days in one week without leave is excluded the school.

“ We appointed two Stewards for the school also. The business of these is, to receive the school subscriptions, and expend what is needful ; to talk with each of the Masters weekly ; to pray with and exhort the children twice a week ; to inquire diligently, whether they grow in grace and in learning, and whether the rules are punctually observed ; every Tuesday morning, in conjunction with the Masters, to exclude those children that do not observe the rules ; every Wednesday morning to meet with and exhort their parents, to train them up at home in the ways of God.

“ A happy change was soon observed in the children, both with regard to their tempers and behaviour. They learned reading, writing, and arithmetic swiftly ; and at the same time they were diligently instructed in the sound

principles of religion, and earnestly exhorted to fear God and work out their own salvation." *

Thus the foundation of Methodist school work was laid. And the record thus given in full has a deep interest, as showing how school work as well as every other branch of Methodist action was kept in close, necessary relation to the spiritual purpose of the Society, and carried out in a style of religious discipline essentially akin to the Society's rules of spiritual intercourse and mutual culture ; in fact, on the principle and after the manner of the Class-Meeting. The design of Methodism in all its departments of work was the spread of holiness ; and the pursuit of the great object whether in class or in school was to be kept up to a consistent intensity by mutual aid, encouragement, and watchfulness. The Schoolmasters were to watch over the spiritual as well as the mental interests of the scholars in the true spirit of Methodist Leaders. The Stewards, in the same spirit, were to take the oversight of both masters and scholars ; and see that the spiritual and moral as well as the educational discipline was preserved from week to week ; while each and all were amenable to the Pastors for obedience to the Society Rules.

Methodism has not ceased to provide for destitute and neglected children after Mr. Wesley's plan ; nor have such mission-schools ceased to maintain their close relation to the Society's work ; nor have they failed to be standing witnesses to the necessary importance of the Class-Meeting among the means of prosperity in school work as well as the spiritual culture of adults. One interesting example may serve to show how this family connection between the school agencies and the Society is kept unbroken. One day in November, 1852, while a zealous Visitor, whose labours have been already referred to, was describing to a

* J. Wesley's Works, vol. viii., pp. 265—267.

friend a scene of juvenile misery which she had witnessed, Mr. Wesley's Free Day-School was alluded to ; the friend inquired,

“ For how many children did Mr. Wesley provide ? ”

“ About sixty,” it was said ; “ but it would be vain for us to attempt to feed and clothe any portion of such a number, or to engage qualified masters and pay them as Mr. Wesley did. My belief is, however, that my class would supply a competent teacher who would gladly take charge of sixty children and give them a little elementary instruction, which is all we must contemplate.”

“ And for what amount of remuneration would she undertake this duty ? ”

“ I think for six shillings a week.”

“ Then,” said the friend, “ you have a room at command ; if you will procure the services of a trustworthy teacher, I will be responsible for the cost, and you may depend on me for this amount as long as I live, and you require it.”

Among those who had been gathered from the sinful crowd by the Visitor and her companions, was a woman of intelligent look and commanding presence, the mother of three children. She could read and write well, possessed untiring energy, and had a strong and musical voice. She had come from the country, and in this kind of retreat she had abandoned herself to vice. Arrested at last, she saw, felt and confessed her sins, joined the class, and was now giving satisfactory proof of an entire change of heart and life. She was made the Teacher of the “ Refuge for Destitute Children,” her own children being included in the number of sixty. After one year’s successful work in that school, another group of sixty was gathered at the expense of another friend. The Class-Meeting supplied the second Teacher. And these converted women in their little unpretending seminaries successfully carried out their object, and while they taught the rudiments of learning,

guided the consciences, regulated the feelings, corrected the morals, and led the hearts of the rescued little ones to their Redeemer. "These little Free Schools became centres of moral influence which acted with greater or less force on the whole neighbourhood ; and the change in the character of the children became manifest to all." They were points of attraction even for rough groups of men and women, and were, in fact, the means of drawing many parents and other adult sinners into connection with the growing Society. "*Hundreds* of children whose prior training was fitting them only for beggary, theft, and prostitution, have gone" from under the care of those Methodist women "to fill situations of trust, and to be a service and blessing to society."

But the vital relation of the Class-Meeting to the prosperity of Methodist School Agencies is shown, not only where those agencies have been the fruit of the Society's evangelical mission work, but in the now wide-spread and influential system of Methodist ordinary Day-Schools. A few years ago one of Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools, a gentleman eminently qualified for his position by wide intelligence, cultured intellect, philosophical acumen, and fine moral sense, expressed himself to the writer, as sure, that if allowed to watch the action of any one school for a day or two, he could fix the standard of the teacher's moral and religious character. At the same time, from his knowledge of Methodist Day-Schools, he, with equal decision, declared his gratification at the uniformly high moral and religious tone by which they seemed to him to be distinguished. Had he attempted to follow a clue to the secret of this, he would have found his way to the Class-Meeting, as the first religious training-school of those to whom alone Methodism entrusts its Day-School work. And if the Day-Schools throughout Methodism, now numbering in England alone nearly one thousand, have hitherto main-

tained this high character for pure morals and religious tone, they owe it mainly to the faithfulness with which the religious character of the Trainers have been kept under discipline and culture in the weekly Class. The true conversion of all candidates for school work has been held to be essential; and their continuance in office to depend on their continued consistency as members of the Society. To the careful maintenance of this family link between the Society and the Day School will Methodism owe all that is distinctive and accordant with her design in the action and prosperity of her Day-Schools.

Mr. Wesley did not, perhaps, institute Sunday-Schools; but some of those who sprang up into Christian life under his ministry, and whose pious zeal was nurtured in the earliest Class-Meetings, were among the first to gather stray children together on the Sunday, for purposes of instruction and religious restraint. Some of the first Sunday-Schools arose under the superintendence of men and women who had been fitted for their work under Methodist discipline. In laying the groundwork of these institutions, however, Mr. Wesley had a personal share, in that he laid down, in a kind of prophetic way, the principles on which they should be founded and worked; principles which are held sacred still, and are acted upon throughout in the present developed condition of the system. He issued "Lessons for Children;" and again, "Instructions for Children." In the prefaces to these little volumes he addresses "All Parents and Schoolmasters." "I have endeavoured," he says, "in the following Lessons to select the plainest and the most useful portions of Scripture; such as children may the most easily understand, and such as it most concerns them to know. These are set down in the same order, and (generally) the same words, wherein they are delivered by the Spirit of God. Where an expression is less easy to be understood, I have subjoined a word or two, by way of

explication ; but taking care not to detain you from your great work with comments longer than the text.

" I cannot but earnestly entreat you to take good heed how you teach these deep things of God. Beware of that common, but accursed way of making children parrots, instead of Christians. Labour that, as far as is possible, they may understand every single sentence which they read. Therefore do not make haste. Regard not how much, but how well, to how good purpose, they read. Turn each sentence every way ; propose it in every light ; and question them continually on every point ; if by any means they may not only read, but inwardly digest the words of eternal life.

" Meantime, you will not fail with all diligence to commend both yourselves and your little ones to Him without Whom, you well know, 'neither is he that planteth anything, nor he that watereth.' You are sensible He alone giveth the increase. May He both minister bread for your own food, and multiply your seed sown, and increase the fruits of your righteousness!"

In another preface he adds, "I have laid before you in the following tract the true principles of the Christian education of children. These should, in all reason, be instilled into them as soon as ever they can distinguish good from evil. If the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, then it is certainly the very first thing they should learn. And why may they not be taught the knowledge of God, and the knowledge of letters at the same time? . . . Although the great truths herein contained are more immediately addressed to children, yet are they worthy the deepest consideration both of the oldest and wisest of men. Let them be deeply engraven in your own hearts, and you will spare no pains in teaching them to others. Above all let them not read or say one line without understanding and minding what they say. . . . By this means they will

learn to think as they learn to read ; they will grow wiser and better every day. And you will have the comfort of observing, that by the same steps they advance in the knowledge of these poor elements, they will also grow in grace, in the knowledge of God, and of our Lord Jesus Christ."*

It is instructive to observe in all this, how, in every department of the work which Mr. Wesley prepared and laid out for Methodists, he kept faithfully to the great design of the whole, the spread of spiritual religion. His Lesson Books were for the use of Methodists ; and it is clear that it was to be a fixed Methodist principle, that the salvation of children is the first object in schooling them, and that to effect this, the Teachers must themselves be saved, and live in the habitual enjoyment of salvation. On this principle Methodist Sunday-Schools were founded, and are still worked. Such schools were, in the wisdom and goodness of Divine Providence, brought into action in England at an important crisis in European history. Modern Infidelity had risen into terrible power on the Continent. It threatened England. And if the rising generations of this country were saved from the downward tendency which carried other nations into the deeps from which they are not as yet fully restored, much, under God, was owing to the rapidly expanded influence and power of Sunday-Schools. For a time, in the earlier course of the movement, there seemed to be a danger lest Sunday-Schools should become so secular in their teaching as to encourage the growth of Sabbath desecration, and almost entirely shut out the more spiritual part of the work ; but the evil tendency was checked. Methodism had much to do with this preservation of Sunday-Schools as religious institutions. The principle of their necessary connection with the Society, and their identity in purpose with the great spiritual design of Methodism, has always been held sacred. If at one period, in some

* J. Wesley's Works, vol. xiv., pp. 216—218.

instances, the maintenance of this principle has appeared difficult or doubtful, the institution has outlived the seeming danger ; and is now working out the principles laid down by Mr. Wesley, and is more affectionately closing into oneness of spiritual purpose with the Society.

The general principles for the regulation of Wesleyan-Methodist Sunday-Schools, recommended by the Conference of 1827, form the permanent basis for the management of each school ; and in accordance with these, each

“ Shall be conducted in distinct and avowed connection with the Wesleyan-Methodist Society ; and shall in every practicable way be worked in harmony with its arrangements, and with a view to its increase and benefit.

“ Its main object shall be to instruct and train scholars in ‘the doctrines, privileges, and duties of the Christian religion,’ and only so much secular teaching as is necessary to secure this end shall be given in it on the Sabbath-day. The Holy Scriptures, and the Catechisms of the Wesleyan-Methodists, shall be used as the means of such instruction and training.

“ The general management shall be entrusted to a Committee, consisting of all the Ministers of the Circuit, of the Treasurer, the general Secretary, and the Superintendents of the School, appointed as hereinafter mentioned. Of six, nine, or more persons to be chosen as follows ; viz. :—

“ One third, being members of the Wesleyan-Methodist Society, by the Leaders’ meeting in the month of December ; one third being Teachers, Secretaries, or Librarians, who are also members of the Wesleyan-Methodist Society, by a general Teachers’ meeting, in the month of December ; one third, by the Committee for the time being, at their last meeting in December, from members of the congregation, or subscribers to the School, who, if not members of Society are nevertheless believed to be cordially attached to the principles and polity of Wesleyan Methodism.”

According to these rules, the entire management of Methodist Sunday-School agencies is inseparable from obedience to the Society's Rules of membership, that is the rule of attendance at the weekly Class. Two thirds, at least, of the Committee in addition to all the officers must be members of the Society, living in weekly fellowship, and mutually helping one another to work out their salvation, and fulfil the purposes for which they are associated in Class. Methodist Schools, as to their proper government, must stand or fall with the faithful use of the Class-Meeting on the part of School governors. Institutions so spiritual in their design can be kept in consistent action only as long as their managers are spiritually minded; and the Methodist standard of spirituality is preserved only as long as the most effective means which Methodism provides are habitually enjoyed.

The qualification of Teachers, also, includes a moral and religious character, full testimonials to which can be secured only from the candidate's Class-Leader, or the Leaders' meeting.

"The Teachers," says the rule, "wherever practicable, shall be members of the Wesleyan-Methodist Society; but if not, they must at least be regular attendants at the chapel, of good moral character, heartily attached to the doctrines and discipline of Methodism, and willing to observe the rules of the school.

"They may be received on trial by the Superintendent of the school; and after a probation of three months, shall be nominated by him at a regular Teachers' meeting, and elected by the meeting; subject, however, to the approbation of the Committee."

Thus provision is made by rule for the continued adaptation of the Teachers' character to their work. Their work is to save the children, and in order to this, they themselves *must* be saved. How far they experience salvation, Metho-

dism has no means of being certified but on the testimony of those who are their spiritual guides and advisers from week to week. There may possibly be circumstances sometimes rendering it impracticable for a teacher to meet regularly in Class, though otherwise qualified for taking some part in the School; but the great work to be aimed at is to be accomplished only by those who give good proof that their sympathies and affections are in full accordance with Christ's will respecting the children.

Sunday-School Teachers hold a peculiar position in the world, and an important place in the Church. In their relation to the world they undertake, as far as may be, to supply the lack of home-training to the rising generation; and their calling in the church is to prepare the young for properly receiving the ministry of the gospel. Their qualifications will consist, not so much in the knowledge they possess, as in certain well formed *habits* of mind, and carefully regulated *feelings* of the heart. There should be a habit of *devotion*. No argument is needed to show the importance of this in one who undertakes to lead children to Christ. The Teacher's task requires a devotional *habit*. Not a mere sentiment, not fitful gusts of good desire only; not merely occasional efforts at prayer, but an habitual love of truth, an even tendency of soul towards heaven, a bent to Godward, a spiritual life, resulting from sincere consecration to God's service, and a diligent and persevering communion at the throne of grace.

Religion cannot be taught successfully unless the lessons derive power from the teacher's religious influence. The influence of personal religion will be in proportion to the fixedness of the devotional habit. School work requires, too, a habit of *diligence* in gathering religious knowledge, and in improving the soul's gifts. *Habitual order, or regularity of movement*, also, is especially needful; as well as an habitual *tranquillity of mind*, and calmness of spirit.

Simplicity, habitual simplicity, or childlikeness of character, is called for with perfect *patience*, and steady *perseverance*. To attain and preserve these qualities requires not only self-discipline, but all the discipline which close Christian fellowship can afford. The history and experience of Methodism in its schools, as well as in every other department of its work, shows that no personal or social religious discipline is so effective in the formation of such habits as prepare for spiritual labour and success, as that of the Class-Meeting, faithfully used and enjoyed. Methodist Sunday-School Teachers, as a body, may fairly be said to be remarkable for their clearly formed, distinctive Christian character, their warm energy, their spiritual tone of feeling, and the definiteness of their aim at the salvation of children. They owe this distinction to the discipline of Class-Meetings.

The great majority of the multitude of Teachers is now composed of those who have been brought up from the children's ranks, and have taken their present places as young converts from among the senior scholars. As converts they have become identified with the Society, and in their weekly Class-Meetings have been trained for religious pursuits, so as to fill their position in the schools with unequalled spiritual efficiency. The Class-Meeting is, in fact, the family link between the School and the Church,—that without which the identity of interest essential to the healthy life of the Methodist body cannot be preserved.

"Bible-classes," or "senior classes," under the care of mature and intelligent Teachers, rightly form transition training schools, from which those scholars who give satisfactory proof of sound conversion and fixed Christian decision may be drafted into Society classes, led by the same Teachers, in the more strict character of Methodist Leaders, or by others who have the best qualifications for guiding the spiritual pursuits of young converts. Indeed, without the Class-Meeting the best fruits of Sunday-School work

cannot be permanently preserved to Methodism. Any farther than the Class-Meeting is the school of spiritual culture for Sunday-School Teachers, and the Class-Meeting in turn is fed from among the scholars of those who have cultivated the grace of fruitfulness in weekly fellowship with their fellow-Christians, Methodist School agencies are wanting in obedience to the letter and the spirit of their own rules, and fall short of the great object of their profession. Class-Meetings are necessary to the harmony of Methodist successes in both congregations and Schools. Let them cease, and the entail of true Methodist prosperity is cut off. Let them cease, and the spiritual life of School agencies in Methodism will gradually die out, for lack of regulated nurture. And then, though an elaborate School mechanism may be inherited by a few generations, there will be, at last, the loss of power to "show to the generation to come the praises of the Lord, and His strength, and His wonderful works that He hath done," so that they "might know them; . . . that they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments."*

* Psalm lxxviii. 4, 6, 7.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Class-Meeting in Relation to Methodist Finances.

A few years ago, a leading journal of Popery in England issued a kind of authoritative appeal on behalf of Church finance. Its object was to stir up Papists to more systematic giving toward the support of Romish churches and the Romish priesthood. The writer affected a sort of apostolic mode of kindling their zeal, by provoking them to jealousy. He set forth the system of Methodist finance as an example. In consistency with his ecclesiastical creed and the spirit of his system, he pronounced the doctrinal and experimental part of Methodism to be false, rotten, and delusive; but, as an admirer of financial order, he looked at the Methodist plan of finance as wise in its conception, sound in principle, beautiful in action, and strikingly successful in result. He gave a fair sketch of the various Methodist funds; showed the sources from which they are raised, how they are managed, and how applied. He called attention especially to the quiet precision, the noiseless energy, and unworldly method of working the whole machinery. Recourse is never had, he said, to questionable and carnal modes of raising money for professed spiritual purposes. "Never do you hear," he continued, addressing his Romish brotherhood, "as among us, of balls, concerts, *fêtes*, lotteries, and other popular modes of extracting funds for the Church from the pleasure-seeking crowds of the world. With all such efforts, we fail to sustain our institutions, or keep them up with painful difficulty. As

to the Methodists, nothing of their money transactions is heard of far from themselves ; nothing of their financial work imposes itself upon the senses of the outside multitude."

Whether or not, if the writer be still alive, he would find reason for lowering his estimate of Methodist freedom from popular and secular methods of raising religious funds, may be a question waiting to be solved. But, however that may be, his warmest approval was expressed of that rule of giving which he held to be distinctive of Methodism, and which he proposed as an example to the English Romanists. It was the rule of weekly contribution in the Class. He was somewhat at a loss to account for the vigour and effect with which this plan was worked, considering, as he said, that it was in support of a system so false and rotten in its doctrinal and religious foundation.

How strangely the atmosphere in which a man lives may affect his power of insight into the springs of human action, and falsify his judgment of other men's principles and actions ! The very doctrines and experiences of Methodism, which he pronounced to be false and insufficient permanently to sustain its financial action, form the secret of its power, and are the living springs of its financial prosperity. The spiritual, loving life, from which the necessity for Class-Meeting fellowship arose, found its natural expression in the regulated sacrifice of temporal good for the accomplishment of the Society's spiritual design. The Class contributions were made in the spirit of those who "were of one heart and of one soul," and who were therefore ready to act as Stewards of their Lord's blessings, no longer calling the things which they possessed *their own*.

Some people, like the writer referred to, have looked at the system of Methodist finance as a thing entirely designed from the first by the legislative genius of Wesley in council with his companions ; but this is a

mistake. The plan of periodical giving, like many other parts of Methodism, both spiritual and the more secular, arose under the call of circumstances, and was adopted to meet a present emergency. It was remarkably so as to the mode of giving in the Classes towards the support of the Gospel. "I was talking," says Mr. Wesley, "with several of the Society in Bristol, concerning the means of paying the debts there, when one stood up and said, 'Let every member of the Society give a penny a week till all are paid.' Another answered, 'But many of them are poor, and cannot afford to do it.' 'Then,' said he, 'put eleven of the poorest with me; and, if they can give anything, well, I will call on them weekly; and if they can give nothing, I will give for them, as well as for myself; and each of you call on eleven of your neighbours weekly, receive what they give, and make up what is wanting.' It was done."*

The mode of giving thus adopted became general, and was incorporated into the Society's Rules as an essential part of the Methodist discipline. The weekly giving is placed in necessary connection with the weekly "communion of saints." Hence, it is the duty of a Leader to "see each person in his class once a week, at least, in order to inquire how their souls prosper." Then, "to receive what they are willing to give towards the support of the Gospel. To meet the Ministers and the Stewards of the Society once a week, in order to inform the Minister of any that are sick, or of any that walk disorderly, and will not be reproved. To pay to the Stewards what they have received of their several classes in the week preceding; and to show their account of what each person has contributed." The necessary importance of this rule, in order to the fulfilment of the spiritual purposes of the Society is laid down by Mr. Wesley, in the Conference of 1782. It is inquired,

* J. Wesley's Works, vol. viii., p. 252.

"Have the weekly and quarterly contribution been duly made in all our Societies?"

"In many it has been shamefully neglected. To remedy this,—

"1. Let every Assistant [Superintendent] remind every Society that this was our original rule: every Member contributes one penny weekly, (unless he is in extreme poverty,) and one shilling quarterly. Explain the reasonableness of this.

"2. Let every Leader receive the weekly contribution from each person in his class.

"3. Let the Assistant ask every person, at changing his ticket, 'Can you afford to observe our rule?' and receive what he is able to give."

This weekly Christian contribution is not only, as Mr. Wesley says, "reasonable," but it is also in beautiful accordance, not merely with the spirit, but the very manner of the primitive Church. God requires the members of His Church to maintain the ordinances of religion. It was the duty of His ancient people to contribute a liberal proportion of their worldly substance towards the support of their Temple Service. This was involved in their duty to God. Christianity, as well as Judaism, has its Divine institutions, on the liberal support of which the spread and perpetuation of the Gospel depend. The institutions of the Christian religion are to be upheld by human agency,—an agency entrusted with time, influence, powers, and earthly property, that they may be sacredly devoted to the cause of Christ. Every Christian occupies the office of "Steward" under a Divine Master. "It is required in Stewards, that a man be found faithful," not merely in the occupation of spiritual advantages, but in the use of temporal good. It is on this principle only that we can account for the Apostle Paul's exercise of authority, when he says to the believers at Corinth: "Upon the first day of the

week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come.” * He recognizes this contribution of property, not as something which may be performed now and then, as caprice or excitement prevails, or the occasional visit of an apostle or distinguished minister seems to demand, but as an important duty, the observance of which is to be as regular as the weekly service, and as continuous as the sanctification of the Lord’s-day. The duty involves a duly proportioned amount of offering ; not according to the rule of convenience, or comfort, or comparison with others, but according to the measure of every one’s ability, “as the Lord hath prospered him.” The apostle speaks of this as the duty of “every one,” whether rich or poor, no one was exempt. It was the privilege and duty of the poorest widow to cast in her mite. It may be said that this rule was oppressive ; but it should be remembered, that while a part of the contributions of the early Church was devoted to the support of the ministry, another portion was distributed among the poor of the flock ; so that they were not only saved from want, but enabled to secure the privilege of conforming to Christian discipline by offering their share of worldly good.

The duty is referred to by the inspired writer as one peculiarly sacred. When rightly performed, it is an act of devotion. Christians were to contribute, “on the first day of the week,” the Christian Sabbath, the day consecrated to religious services. St. Paul saw nothing in the observance of this duty which tended to mar the spirituality of worship, or to violate the sanctity of the Lord’s-day ; on the contrary, it was to form a branch of their Sabbath duty, a part of their Christian devotion. This is sufficient to convince every sincere and teachable mind that God still requires His people to maintain the ordinances of religion.

* 1 Corinthians xvi. 2

He requires it as a debt of gratitude, as a tribute to His honour, as an acknowledgment of their stewardship, and as the most hallowed of temporal means for supporting the agencies of His kingdom on earth.

In this, Methodism is conformed, as nearly as may be, to the apostolic spirit and method. Its rule is framed on the principle that it is the duty of each individual member of the Church to contribute according to his or her ability : to do this weekly : to do it as a part of the weekly service of Christian fellowship with each other and of devotion to Christ. It is taken for granted by the rule that none can enter into the spirit of this duty but those who sincerely "desire to flee from the wrath to come, and to be saved from sin ;" and that the contributions of earthly good, in each case, will be as earnest, cheerful, and regular as their efforts to glorify Christ by helping each other in His spiritual service.

In Methodism, the institution of the Class-Meeting is a link which keeps the temporal support of those who minister the Word in consistent connection with the spiritual results of their ministrations. The rule of Class contributions supposes that such sacrifices are acceptable fruits of spiritual life ; and that it is only as far as they are so that Methodists are conformed in spirit and practice to the apostolic order. "Let him that is taught in the word communicate unto him that teacheth in all good things. Be not deceived ; God is not mocked : for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption ; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting." For "who goeth a warfare any time at his own charges ? who planteth a vineyard, and eateth not of the fruit thereof ? or, who feedeth a flock, and eateth not of the milk of the flock ? Say I these things as a man ? or saith not the law the same also ? for it is written in the

law of Moses, Thou shalt not muzzle the mouth of the ox that treadeth out the corn. Doth God take care for oxen? Or saith He it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, this is written: that he that plougheth should plough in hope; and that he that thresheth in hope should be partaker of his hope. If we have sown unto you spiritual things, is it a great thing if we shall reap your carnal things? . . . Do ye not know that they that minister about holy things live of the things of the temple? and they which wait at the altar are partakers with the altar? Even so hath the Lord ordained that they which preach the Gospel should live of the Gospel."*

In accordance with this Divine and primitive plan, Methodist preachers are supported. Their temporal need is supplied; they are "kept" by those who, in the Scriptural sense, are saved under their ministry. Methodism gathers its living converts into classes; and acts on the principle that its spiritual children are to be the legitimate supporters of the agency by which they have received salvation. The success of the plan, as long as it is fairly carried out, is one striking evidence of the purity and wisdom of the principle on which it is founded. Endowments of all kinds, sooner or later, show their tendency to corruption. The questionable character of their influence on both priests and people, preachers and congregations, pastors and flocks, is too manifest. It is as instructive as it is amusing to watch the early development of the simple financial plans of the Methodists; and to see their healthy results among themselves, and the startling effect of their success on the wondering multitudes outside. "I think, Sir," says Mr. Wesley, giving an account of the Methodists to his friend Perronet, "now you know all that I know of this people. You see the nature, occasion, and design of whatever is practised among them. And I trust you may

* Galatians vi. 6—8; 1 Corinthians ix. 7—14.

be pretty well able to answer any questions which may be asked concerning them, particularly by those who inquire concerning my revenue, and what I do with it all.

"Some have supposed this was no greater than that of the Bishop of London. But others computed that I received eight hundred a year from Yorkshire only. Now, if so, it cannot be so little as ten thousand pounds a year, which I receive out of all England !

"Accordingly a gentleman in Cornwall (the Rector of Redruth) extends the calculation pretty considerably. 'Let me see,' said he, 'two millions of Methodists ; and each of these paying twopence a week.' If so, I must have eight hundred and sixty thousand pounds, with some odd shillings and pence, a year.

"A tolerable competence ! But be it more or less, it is nothing at all to me. All that is contributed or collected in every place is both received and expended by others ; nor have I so much as the ' beholding thereof with my eyes.' And so it will be till I turn Turk or Pagan. For I look upon all this revenue, be it what it may, as sacred to God and the poor ; out of which, if I want anything, I am relieved, even as another poor man. So were originally all ecclesiastical revenues, as every man of learning knows ; and the Bishops and Priests used them only as such. If any use them otherwise now, God help them!"*

The gathering and the distribution of these funds are by Methodist rule inseparably associated with the Class-Meeting. The spring of the supplies is in the Class-Meeting. The weekly pence offerings are gathered by the Leader. By him they are paid to the Society Stewards at their weekly meeting, when the Class-Books are examined and overlooked by the Stewards and the presiding Minister. By the Stewards, the weekly expenses of the Ministers are paid in the form of "board-money," and the surplus then

* J. Wealey's Works, vol. viii., pp. 287, 288.

comes into the hands of the Circuit Stewards, who, at the Quarterly Meeting of the Circuit, wind up the quarterly account of income and expenditure. A collection may be periodically made in the congregation to aid these Circuit funds ; but the main supply comes from the Classes, in which the contributions are made as a part of the religious service of the members in weekly communion. And so interwoven are all the financial actions with the spiritual design and pursuits of the system, that to withdraw one element, or to dispense with one movement, would, to a serious extent, disqualify Methodism for the pursuit of its great design. Spiritual life in Methodism has its only successful culture in the Class ; the Class contributions are the practical expressions of its spiritual life ; and only as far as its spiritual life is kept distinctive and powerful will its practical charity be equal to the sustenance of its living ministry. Only while the spiritual life and the financial action of Methodism are maintained in faithful harmony, will its funds spring at the call of necessity, and be administered with the healthy vigour, prudence, generosity, and effect which are so beautifully exemplified in some of the records of its earlier action.

In one Conference a question is put and answered with authoritative kindness—

“Are not many of the Preachers’ wives still straitened for the necessities of life ?

“Some certainly have been. To prevent this for the time to come—(1) Let every Circuit either provide each with a lodging, coals, and candles, or allow her fifteen pounds a year ; (2) Let the Assistant take this money at the Quarterly Meeting, before anything else be paid out of it. Fail not to do this.”*

How nearly these early Methodists approached the standard of primitive Christian character ! What pure

* J. Wesley’s Works, vol. viii., p. 327.

unselfishness! What beautiful simplicity! It might be said of these children of Christian toil,—

“For them light labour spread her wholesome store,
And gave what life required, but gave no more :
Their best companions—innocence and health,
And their best riches—ignorance of wealth.”

By them, the “carnal things” of which St. Paul speaks, were thought of only as far as they were necessary to support them in their spiritual pursuits; and “spiritual things” inspired the pure motives and that loving kindness which was ever ready to dispense temporal good as each “had need.” Neither the giving nor the receiving was apart from the weekly fellowship of the Society. Those who gave, gave in their Class-Meetings. Those who took charge of the offerings were Leaders of Classes. Those who dispensed the funds had proved themselves qualified for office by their diligent use of weekly intercourse with their Class-mates. And while Methodism has held to this first pure principle of church finance, its funds have prospered, its agencies have been kept in healthy action, and its spiritual purposes have been fulfilled, though its temporal resources have seemed unequal to its design. How many Methodist Preachers have been able to use the language of an earlier Itinerant, “Moreover, brethren, we do you to wit of the grace of God bestowed on the churches . . . ; how that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded unto the riches of their liberality. For to their power, I bear record, yea, and beyond their power, they were willing of themselves; praying us with much entreaty that we would receive the gift, and take upon us the fellowship of the ministering to the saints. And this they did, not as we hoped, but first gave their own selves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God.”* The apostolic doctrine has been acted upon by

* 2 Corinthians viii. 1—5.

many Methodist generations, "if there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not;" and many a devoted Society has lived to illustrate what "is written, He that had gathered much had nothing over; and he that had gathered little had no lack."

Of late years, however, among some professed Methodists, there has been too evident a tendency to irregular financial action. The rule of weekly giving has, in some instances, ceased to be observed, or has been in danger of falling into disuse. Influenced by natural laxity of habit, or a disposition to mend rules rather than to keep them, or weakness of purpose, or false or unreasonable notions about money offerings being inconsistent with the spiritual service of the Class-Meeting; some Leaders have been allowed to become habitually negligent of a part of the discipline which they pledged themselves to sustain when they undertook their office. As the result of their irregularity, the contributions in their Classes have become quarterly instead of weekly offerings. The poorer members, who could with comparative ease give a penny, at least, at the weekly meeting, have thus been thrown into the difficulty of raising the large amount at the end of the quarter; and when the difficulty repeats itself often, they, at last, yield to temptation, and absent themselves from the Class. This inattention to the simple primitive rule serves to deprive many of the poorer Methodists of the privilege of sharing in the work of sustaining the Gospel; and issues generally in financial confusion and inefficiency. It would be found, on a careful survey of Methodist Circuits, that, in most cases, financial difficulty has certainly followed the neglect of the original plan of weekly giving, and that a return to the primitive order, and a faithful revival of obedience to the rule, bring restored health and sufficiency to the Society funds.

To break one rule is often to induce a breach of others: and the disuse of weekly contributions is almost invariably found in association with irregular attendance at Class, slovenly modes of keeping Class-books, neglect of Leaders' Meetings, lack of vigorous co-operation between Leaders and Pastors, loss of sympathy between officers and people, and general feebleness of Circuit action. No mode of sustaining the Ministry will be found adequate to the demands of Methodism, in the absence of Society contributions; nor will these be found equal unless both the spiritual and financial purpose of the Class-Meeting be diligently, regularly, and devoutly fulfilled. Here and there a disposition shows itself in favour of making the support of the Ministry comparatively independent of Class contributions, by the aid of quarterly or annual subscriptions from without, periodical bazaars, etc. It is significant, however, that the movement in this direction is most decided on the part of those who pay least respect to the Class-Meeting; those who are most irregular in attendance, or who entirely absent themselves, or advocate its disuse as a test of membership, or show themselves even void of sympathy with the spiritual objects and pursuits of the Society. This fact has a painful significance. It is one of the most impressive evidences in favour of the Class-Meeting; and clearly indicates the necessarily close relation between spiritual discipline and the financial integrity and order of Methodism.

Nowhere is the mutual dependance of "carnal things" and "spiritual things" more apparent than in the Methodist system. Nowhere could this mutual dependance be disturbed with more disastrous results. No farther than the financial supplies of Methodism are the pure fruits of its spiritual life will the temporal support and spiritual sustenance of its agencies be in such harmony as befits its calling and aim.

The breaking up of its Class-Meetings would result in the

collapse of its voluntary power to sustain its funds. The ability to concentrate its spiritual life would cease ; and then the native tendency of its money power would gradually bear it downward into corruption. The prosperity of Methodism is according to its purity. It is pure no longer than its Ministry is pure in motive, and strong in the assurance of support from the souls who are the fruit of its labour. Anything that tends to render its Ministry independent of such support tends to corruption. The happy certainty that the maintenance of its agencies is the pure work of love, gives Methodism a strength which it cannot lose without missing its aim, ceasing to prosper, and even ceasing to live. That strength will never be lost as long as Methodists are faithful to the spirit and rule of their Class-Meeting fellowship. But if, in submission to modern tendencies, they fail to work out fairly the original plan of finance ; if they permit the weekly Class offerings to fall into disuse, allow the order of weekly Leaders' Meeting business to sink into neglect ; and seek dependance upon outside, uncertain, and un-Methodistic means of supply, they will lose their glory, and become weak as others, and as uncertain and unsatisfactory in the progress and the results of their work. Let the system of Methodist finance become a mere theory, consequent upon a neglect of the Class-Meeting institution, or its continuance in form only, and Methodism will have entered into a condition of pecuniary unhealthiness, and a stage of spiritual decline in which it will prove unequal to the first great purpose of its life.

On the integrity of the Class-Meeting depends, also, one important branch of Methodist ministration to the poor. At first, the contributions in the Classes were largely employed in relieving the poor ; but as the number of Preachers increased, and the growing demands of their families were to be met, supplies in a larger proportion had to be granted

to them out of the common fund ; Mr. Wesley himself, as he says, “ if wanting anything, being relieved from it, even as another poor man.” It is to Mr. Wesley’s burning desire to maintain this common fund so efficiently as to meet all demands both of the Ministry and the poor, that we owe some of his warmest and most searching appeals to the Methodists of his time. These appeals are still instructive as records of his strong conviction, that a fairly regulated contribution of temporal good on the part of Methodist Christians formed an essential part of their obedience to the rule of spiritual fellowship ; on the principle of our Lord’s question, “ If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches.” *

“ Can any servant,” says Wesley, “ afford to lay out his Master’s money, any otherwise than his Master appoints him ? So far from it, that whoever does this ought to be excluded from a Christian Society. ‘ But is it possible to supply all the poor in our Society with the necessaries of life ? ’ It was possible once to do this, in a larger Society than this. In the first church at Jerusalem, ‘ there was not any among them that lacked ; but distribution was made to every one, according as he had need.’ And we have full proof that it may be so still. It is so among the people called Quakers. Yea, and among the Moravians, so called. And why should it not be so with us ? ‘ Because they are ten times richer than we.’ Perhaps, fifty times ; and yet, we are able enough, if we were equally willing, to do this. . . . Now suppose this could be done, are we clear before God while it is not done ? Is not the neglect of it one cause why so many are still sick and weak among you ; and that both in soul and in body ? That they still grieve the Holy Spirit, by preferring the fashions of the world to the commands of God ? And I many times

* St. Luke xvi. 11.

doubt whether we Preachers are not, in some measure, partakers of their sin. I am in doubt whether it is not a kind of partiality. I doubt whether it is not a great sin to keep them in our Society. May it not hurt their souls by encouraging them to persevere in walking contrary to the Bible? And may it not, in some measure, intercept the salutary influences of the Blessed Spirit upon the whole community? I am distressed. I know not what to do. I see what I might have done once." *

This faithful man's ideal of Methodist charity was never fully realized. Methodism has never supplied all the need of its own poor. But it has never entirely failed to relieve and comfort them. The weekly givings of the Classes have ceased to be a fund for the poor, any other than on Mr. Wesley's showing in his own case, the Preachers and their families are dependents on them for what is necessary to their support. The offerings at the Lord's Supper and the collections at the Society Lovefeasts are now the sources of supply for the relief of poor and needy Methodists. And where the object of these collections is kept in view, the proportion of giving is becomingly liberal, so that the poor are enabled to secure the pleasure of contributing their mite towards the support of the Gospel. This fund is thus contributed in meetings to which, generally, those only who can show their last quarterly Class-ticket have access. It is under the care of Stewards whose Class-membership is the first qualification for office. Its relief-grants are made at the Leaders' meeting; in each case, at the recommendation of the Leader in whose Class the needy member meets; and thus the practical charity of Methodism is inseparably bound up with its Class-Meeting life and action. The healthy exercise of its benevolence is maintained only as its weekly fellowship is enjoyed; and its means of blessing its own poor will be efficient and fruitful only as far as it is

* J. Wesley's Works, vol. vii., pp. 286, 287.

happily conformed to its own rules of Church-membership. Were it possible for Methodism to be left without the vigorous action of its Class-Meetings, its organized charities would be left without a motive power, left to fall into hopeless derangement. To suppose this, however, is to suppose Methodism to be no longer Methodism. Without its distinctive discipline, Methodism would be without its life ; and when its life is gone, let its frame-work melt !

From its beginning Methodism was a Home Mission. It was soon felt that something more was needed than the maintenance of a Pastorate over the established Societies, and the temporal relief of the poor. Debts on chapels had accumulated, expenses had been incurred in providing legal defence against persecution, many Circuits needed help to sustain the Ministry of the word among them, and men from the regions beyond were loudly crying "Come over and help us !" The attempt to meet these demands gave rise to what has since been called the "Home Mission and Contingent Fund." The history of this fund is deeply interesting, as it shows how the missionary action of the Society sprang out of its first spiritual life and love, and continued as the natural expression of the zeal which was nurtured in the separate meetings of the Society. The account of the origin of this fund is given under the 73rd question in the "Large Minutes."

"How may we raise a general fund for carrying on the whole work of God ?

"By a yearly subscription to be proposed by every Assistant when he visits the classes at Christmas, and received at the visitation following. To this end he may then read and enlarge upon the following hints in every Society.

"1. How shall we send labourers into those parts where they are most of all wanted ? Suppose the North West of Ireland and the North of Scotland. Many are willing to

hear but not to bear the expense. Nor can it as yet be expected of them. Stay till the Word of God has touched their hearts, and then they will gladly provide for them that preach it. Does it not lie upon us in the mean time, to supply their lack of service? To raise a general fund, out of which from time to time that expense may be defrayed? By this means, those who willingly offer themselves may travel through every part, and stay wherever there is a call, without being burdensome to any. Thus may the Gospel, in the life and power thereof, be spread from sea to sea. Which of you will not rejoice to throw in your mite, to promote this glorious work?

" 2. Besides this, in carrying on so large a work through the three Kingdoms, there are calls for money in various ways, and we must frequently be at considerable expense, or the work must be at a full stop. Many, too, are the occasional distresses of our Preachers or their families, which require an immediate supply. Otherwise their hands would hang down, if they were not constrained to depart from the work.

" 3. Let then every member of our Society once a year set his shoulder to the work; contributing more or less as God hath prospered him, at the Lady-Day visitation of the Classes. Let none be excluded from giving something,—be it a penny, a half-penny, a farthing. Remember the widow's two mites! And let those who are able to give shillings, crowns, and pounds, do it willingly. The money contributed will be brought to the ensuing Conference.

" 4. Men and brethren, help! Was there ever a call like this, since you first heard the Gospel sound? Help to relieve your companions in the Kingdom of Jesus, who are pressed above measure.

" 'Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.' Help to send forth able, willing labourers into

your Lord's harvest. So shall ye be assistant in saving souls from death, and hiding a multitude of sins. Help to spread the Gospel of your salvation into the remotest corners of the Kingdom, till '*the knowledge of our Lord shall cover the land, as the waters cover the sea.*' So shall it appear to ourselves, and all men, that we are indeed one body, united by one Spirit ; so shall the baptized Heathens be yet again constrained to say, 'See how these Christians love one another !' In this may not even the Romanists provoke us to jealousy ? They have a general fund at Rome, and another at Paris, which bears all the expenses of their Missionaries throughout all the world."*

The Home Missionary Fund thus started a century ago, is still sustained, and works with growing efficiency, as a part of that financial system which is held together and kept moving by the regulated life and action of combined Methodist Classes. It is aided now by supplies from some outside sources, in the form of annual collections and subscriptions, but its essential strength, its sustaining life, is drawn from offerings in the Class-Meeting. It lives still to afford the Word of Life to the needy ; deriving indispensable vigour from the yearly givings of those who respond to the Minister's appeal during the March visitation of the Classes. Methodism could not do its Home Missionary work without its Class-Meeting order, life and power. Mr. Wesley took it for granted that adequate pecuniary support for such a work could only spring from loving Christian hearts, themselves in the enjoyment of saving truth, and banded in brotherly union, provoking one another to "love and to good works." It cannot be expected, said he, that those who are mere willing hearers of the Gospel should be ready to bear the expense. "Stay till the Word of God has touched their hearts, and then they will

* J. Wesley's Works, vol. viii., p. 335, 336.

gladly provide for them that preach it." A work like this will be supported healthily and permanently only by spiritually-minded people. And in Methodism the Class-Meeting is a fair test of such spiritual mindedness. The true spiritual mind of Methodism is collected in its Classes. In these the highest standard of such a mind is reached and exemplified. The standard is kept up by diligent obedience to rule; and when the standard of that obedience is lowered, the standard of spiritual life comes down in proportion, and the work of God finds but enfeebled support.

The history of the Yearly Collection in the Classes will afford an index to the comparative rise or fall of Methodist spirituality and love. Just as the outer multitude is depended upon for means to carry out the object of Home Missions, the missions will fall short of their design; for nothing but the constraining love of Christ is equal to that steady and hallowed supply of means which properly answers to so holy a purpose. To disband Class-Meetings would be to dissipate the spiritual life which they have been the means of creating and maturing; and necessarily to scatter the organized means of gathering and using the fruits of that life for the benefit of the needy. The Home-Missionary action of Methodism and the integrity of its Class-Meetings live on together, or together cease. From the Classes most of the supplies spring; and only so far as the officials who administer those supplies are faithful to the rule of Methodist fellowship, can there be any satisfactory guarantee that the object of the fund is faithfully pursued. In this, as well as in all other departments of Methodism, continued life and success depend on the harmony of the system; and there can be no harmony without faithfulness to the central distinctive principle of the system, spiritual union and communion in Society Classes. Methodist mission funds and mission work require now what they required at the beginning. As Mr. Wesley says in his

appeal for help, it must "appear to ourselves, and all men, that we are indeed one body, united by one spirit ; so shall the baptized Heathens be yet again constrained to say, 'See how these Christians love one another !'" Indeed, never did Methodist Home-Mission work require, among Methodists, union so close, so spiritual, and so diligently cultivated as now. Never did the work call for such holy effort to realize that mutual encouragement and stimulation which the proper use of the Class-Meeting alone can afford. The work has entered on a stage of quicker movement. Its plans are enlarged. Its forces are multiplied and are thrown out on a wider range. Rural districts are marked for new toil. The retreats of city masses are invaded. The army and navy are cared for to a larger extent : and all this requires a steady growth of means which can only be the fruit of spiritual vigour and concentrated powers of godliness among a united community.

It is remarkable, too, that the great work of Methodist Foreign Missions owes its most glorious and most permanent success, under God, to a faithful observance of the rule respecting Class-Meetings. The fruit has been accumulative ; the seed has often been self-sown, and the principle of Class-Meeting fellowship has had its practical development in self-multiplying native agency. Methodist missionary finance largely derives its life from Class contributions among the enrolled converts ; and the large proportion of supplies from the foreign Churches is the standing testimony to the essential importance of the Class-Meeting as, at once a spiritual nursery and a school of Church finance. Nor will the Mission Churches of Methodism become self-supporting, and fruitful Mission Churches in their turn, any farther than they faithfully maintain intact the institution of the Class-Meeting. All other pecuniary resources may change with times and circumstance, but supplies springing from hearts that love Christ and each other will

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be forthcoming as long as loving hearts enjoy "the communion of saints." How jealous was Mr. Wesley over the purity of the sources on which Methodism was to rely for support! He seems to be keenly sensitive to the least approaching shade of corruption. Sometimes he appears to have the faculty of prophetic forecast. Coming shadows touch him, and he gives out his warning voice : " Let all preaching-houses be built plain and decent ; but not more expensive than is absolutely unavoidable ; otherwise the necessity of raising money will make rich men necessary to us. But if so, we must be dependent upon them, yea, and governed by them ; and then farewell to the Methodist discipline, if not doctrine too."* Methodism will be sustained while its holy design is cast on the hearts of its people ; and the hearts of its people will be true to that design while they are true to the spirit and rule of their weekly Class.

* J. Wesley's Works, vol. viii., p. 332.

CHAPTER IX.

Class-Meetings in their Relation to Objectors and Neglecters.

It is interesting and instructive to compare modern objections to the Class-Meeting with those which were urged against it during the days of Wesley. For the most part, the early objections have merely repeated themselves. What is said on the question now varies little from what was said at first. Wesley has recorded the exceptions which were pressed in his time; and has left them with his answers attached, for the benefit of those who like to watch the processes by which old things are served up again and again as new.

"Notwithstanding all the advantages of meeting thus," says he, "many were at first extremely averse to it. Some viewing it in a wrong point of light, not as a privilege (indeed an invaluable one) but rather a restraint, disliked it on that account, because they did not love to be restrained in anything. Some were ashamed to speak before company. Others honestly said, 'I do not know why, but I do not like it.'

"Another objection was, 'There is no scripture for this, for Classes, and I know not what.' I answer, 1. There is no scripture against it. You cannot show one text that forbids them. 2. There is much scripture for it, even all those texts which enjoin the substance of those various duties whereof this is only an indifferent circumstance to be determined by reason and experience. 3. You seem not to have observed that the Scripture, in most points gives only general rules; and leaves the particular circum-

stances to be adjusted by the common sense of mankind. The Scripture, for instance, gives that general rule, ‘Let all things be done decently and in order.’ But common sense is to determine, on particular occasions, what order and decency require. So, in another instance, the Scripture lays it down as a general standing direction, ‘Whether ye eat or drink, or whatever ye do, do all to the glory of God !’ But it is common prudence which is to make the application of this in a thousand particular cases.

“‘But these,’ said another, ‘are all man’s inventions.’ This is but the same objection in another form. And the same answer will suffice for any reasonable person. . . .

“They spoke far more plausibly than these, who said, ‘The thing is well enough in itself; but the Leaders are insufficient for the work : they have neither gifts nor graces for such an employment.’ I answer, 1. Yet, such Leaders as they are, it is plain God has blessed their labour. 2. If any of these is remarkably wanting in gifts or grace, he is soon taken notice of and removed. 3. If you know any such, tell it to me, not to others, and I will endeavour to exchange him for a better. 4. It may be hoped they will all be better than they are, both by experience and observation, and by the advices given them by the Minister, . . . and the prayers offered up for them. . . .

“An objection much more boldly and frequently urged” against the Bands as against the Classes before, “is, that ‘all these are mere Popery.’ I hope I need not pass a harder censure on those (most of them at least) who affirm this, than that they talk of they know not what ; they betray in themselves the most gross and shameful ignorance. Do not they yet know that the only Popish confession is the confession made by a single person to a priest ? . . . Whereas what we practise is, the confession of several persons conjointly, not to a priest, but to each other. Consequently, *it has no analogy at all to Popish confession.* But the truth

is, this is a stale objection which many people make against anything they do not like. It is all Popery out of hand." *

Several of the objections which Wesley thus answered continue to make themselves heard. There are those still who "talk of they know not what," and pertinaciously press the charge of Popery. All that is necessary among reasonable people is to repeat Mr. Wesley's reply.

A larger number of persons continually object to Class-Meetings because of the difficulty of speaking. They are either, as in Wesley's day, "ashamed to speak in company," or they are afraid of expressing themselves incorrectly, or untruly, or they shrink from unfolding their religious thought, or from disclosing feelings which they think should be sacredly kept within themselves. But surely a full earnestness of desire for spiritual instruction and guidance in the way of salvation would sooner or later master constitutional timidity so far as to render Christian communion an enjoyable privilege. Some more than others feel the cross. To all, the cross is at times far from being light; but in the pursuit of personal salvation is there to be no cross? If, on the testimony of so many generations of Christians, and from the recorded utterances of holy experience in the Sacred Volume, it is shown that such mutual intercourse as that of a Class, offers desirable help to a sincere seeker of Divine mercy, should a mere native shyness, or disinclination to speak, be allowed to involve the seeker in the neglect of what promises to be a means of grace? Were the Class-Meeting necessarily a place for speech-making on the part of the members, and for set speeches in return on the Leader's side; or were it a meeting for exercising the gift of speech in the delivery of religious or theological discourses; or were it a meeting at which some theme from the Bible or any other volume is discussed, and each member is expected to take a full share

* J. Wesley's Works, vol. viii., pp. 254, 255, 259.

in the discussion ; or were it imperative, even, that every member should always take an equal part in the more free and familiar conversation of a Class, the objection on the part of the nervously sensitive or reserved might be valid ; but none of these things were ever designed to be characteristic of a Class-Meeting. They have, in too many instances, been made so. And so many artificial modes have been persevered in, that the original design of the meeting has been sometimes nearly lost ; and the institution itself has taken forms which have begotten misapprehension and widespread prejudice.

One of the most cultured and intelligent Christians that ever graced the ranks of Methodism, once told the writer that in his earlier course he was unhappily associated with a Class carried on in the speech-making style. He was earnest and sincere, and persevered in hope of spiritual blessing ; but when, at times, he found himself unequal to the demands of what he thought to be his Class duty, his excuse for absence, to himself, and on one occasion to his Leader, was, that he had not "got up anything" for the meeting ! Another illustrative case is remembered. A Minister met a Class at the quarterly visitation. It was very large, and had in it a majority of young men. It was found that one secret of the popularity of the Class and its Leader was in the fact, that the meeting was allowed to afford opportunity for exercise in religious oratory or eloquence. The Minister found himself called to listen to a succession of trial sermons, until stern duty obliged him to enforce a check. One member, after a quarter of an hour's full flow, closed by remarking that so many things pressed on his mind that he was at a loss to know how to choose a point. The Minister handed his ticket to him, quietly saying, that he found himself in the same difficulty among the many things to which he had so long listened. Nor would the history of Class-Meetings be barren of evidence

that it is possible to make them dry catechetical, literary, reading clubs rather than means of spiritual interchange of sympathy, and mutual encouragement to heart meditation and prayer.

Many of those who are most tender in their sense of difficulty as to speaking on religious things in the Class, are fluent on all ordinary questions out of Class ; showing that it is not the gift of speech that is lacking. And very many, too, find it comparatively easy and even pleasant to commune with friends in home intercourse on their daily spiritual experiences, proving that the difficulty in the Class would vanish as soon as the true family character of the Class-Meeting was apprehended and appreciated. Nor is the fear of giving incorrect expression to personal thought and feeling worthy of being weighed against the advantages of Class intercourse. Perfect sincerity is the certain cure for all such fears. When the heart is firmly and warmly set on the enjoyment of piety, the tongue will soon be happily submissive to the ruling principle, and accurately attuned to the master feeling. And surely none can listen thoughtfully to the soul utterances from prophets, the out-spoken experiences of divine psalmists, the outflowings of Paul's heart, and the deep but child-like language of John's soul, and deliberately object to commune with fellow-Christians, on the ground that inward religion is too sacred a thing to talk about. True, there is the warning, "Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine ;" and the Christian or the seeker of Christianity cannot be too guarded in "the presence of a foolish man," or act too devoutly on the resolution, "I will keep my mouth with a bridle, while the wicked is before me ;" but a Christian's fellow-disciples are not to be classed with dogs, his companions in spiritual pursuits are not swine. What a reverent spirit would seal up against unholy eyes and ears, it is most natural and consistent for him to open

to kindred souls. And the more hallowed his inner man the more full and free will be his holy conversation with his brethren in Christ. If religious thought and feeling were too sacred to be talked about among those who enjoy them, what "communion of saints" could there be? No, reverence for spiritual things cannot be without expression. The holier the theme the more richly overflowing will be the mutual discourse between those in whom the theme begets the same reverent uniting love.

Some objectors to Class-Meetings are still found whose alleged reason is dislike to association with many who meet in Class; either because of their humble rank in life, or their uncultured or supposed untruthful language in Class, or the unfitness or inconsistency of their character. Nothing need be said in answer to those who found their objection on the question of social rank; their objection is rather against the religion of Christ. Christianity admits no law of caste. It requires every disciple to "honour all men," and to "love the brotherhood" irrespective of rank, as He did, Who chose "the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which He hath promised to them that love Him."* To shrink from godly companionship with those who meet in the name of Jesus because of their mere outward condition, is to be unworthy of such company, and unmeet for the presence of the Master. And what has Christian communion to do with any particular standard of culture in language? Can there be no simplicity and godly sincerity of conversation without a highly educated tongue? Cannot the utterances of a true heart be so given as to be appreciated and enjoyed, unless the lips be trained to critical accuracy, and the tones of speech be pleasantly in tune? What depths of spiritual life, what strength of holy principle, what treasures of rich feeling, what experiences of heavenly wisdom and consolation disclose themselves at

* James ii. 5.

times from beneath homely, uncouth, and even rude forms of expression ! Nowhere have evidences of this been so full, and instructive, and edifying as in Methodist Class-Meetings. And to object to such meetings because of the mere style in which some of those who meet speak out the thoughts and feelings of their souls, is really to recommend them ; for it serves to show that they effectively sustain a ground-principle of Christian communion, that no one mode of speech is essential to oneness and harmony of spirit ; that Christians may be “rude in speech, yet not in knowledge ;” that, however ungrammatically or inelegantly the divinely moved “servants and handmaidens” may “prophesy,” yet there may be “uncorruptness, gravity, sincerity,” and “sound speech that cannot be condemned ;” so “that he that is of the contrary part may be ashamed, having no evil thing to say of them,”* except that their diction is not in good taste.

Nor is there much more worth in the objection of those who complain of untruthful statements on the part of some Class-members. If by this objection no more is meant than that some who meet in Class and do their best to express their religious thought and feeling, sometimes fail to give the exact shade of their thought, or to utter the precise kind or degree of their feeling, from lack of culture, or small knowledge of words, or momentary confusion or excitement ; it cannot be particularly urged against Class-Meetings. It would be equally an objection against the ordinary intercourse of all business and social life. Those who are most used to weigh words, to balance thought, and to fit the expression to the meaning, know enough of themselves to prevent them from objecting to association with their neighbours in important pursuits, because some of those neighbours have not yet learnt to define their own notions correctly, or always to use the most proper word.

* Titus ii. 7, 8.

It would be found that one subordinate recommendation of Class-Meetings is, that as effective means of regulating the heart, they have proved successful schools for correcting and refining the tongue.

If by untruthful statements an objector means deliberate falsehood, then his objection lies against unfitness or inconsistency of character on the part of some in the meeting. It might be said, in reply, that to keep aloof from what is a good to many, because it is abused by a few, is not wise. Or it might be replied that, in the present condition of human nature, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to "discern," under the garb of profession, "between the righteous and the wicked ; between him that serveth God and him that serveth Him not."* The law is still in force, "Judge not, that ye be not judged."† "Who art thou that judgest another man's servant ? to his own master he standeth or falleth."‡ And charity is still the rule ; charity, that in the worst cases "hopeth all things," and "never faileth."§

But it should be remembered that where inconsistency becomes really manifest in the character of Class-members, Methodism has the most effective and the most prompt means of *purg ing out the old leaven*, and of *putting away the wicked person* from among its members; and the Class-Meeting is an essential part of that discipline by which it can maintain its purity. If those who hold themselves pure keep away from the very meetings in Methodism which have proved the most certain means of checking and throwing off inconsistency, they are helping to weaken the power by which alone the evils they complain of can be cured. Mr. Wesley, from the beginning found occasional sifting necessary ; and the records of his periodical visitations of the Classes will show

* Malachi iii. 18.

† St. Matthew vii. 1.

‡ Romans xiv. 4.

§ 1 Corinthians xiii. 7, 8.

that the Class-Meeting rule has in itself the remedy for all that is not in keeping with its spirit and design. It is the simplicity of the institution, the strictness of its discipline, and the purity of its purpose, that at once render more conspicuous any thing in character or life that is not akin to spiritual purity and light. "It must needs be that offences come."* Evil will, in the course of things, show itself in holiest places, and amidst the holiest society. But is that a valid reason for forsaking holy places, and for refusing communion with the society of the faithful? The fact of occasional inconsistency is admitted, and who among the best can plead invariable consistency? But the admitted fact, so far from affording valid ground for objection to Class-Meetings, is among the best proofs of their excellence, their necessity, and their obligation. Those who are most forward to complain of unfitness of character in members of the Class, are those, for the most part, who would fain make attendance at the Lord's Table the test of Church-membership; but their objection, had it any force in the one case, becomes far more forcible in the other. Are there no inconsistencies among those who gather in silence at the Lord's Table? A strait-laced member of an exclusive sect once objected to a venerable and saintly woman that the order of communion in her Church was such as encouraged the attendance of hypocrites. "Are you sure," responded the shrewd old lady, "that all who 'break bread' with you are what they should be?" "Well," replied the objector, "of course, we cannot certainly say." "Then," was the closing retort, "you must allow me to believe that our hypocrites are as good as yours!"

Into what company shall a man enter, what associations shall he form, within the Church or without; to what companionship, combinations, or leagues shall he join himself, for purposes of business, literature,

* St. Matthew xviii. 7.

science, benevolence, or recreation, if the discovery of inconsistency, here and there, be a reasonable objection to them all? No; such an objection to Class-Meetings has no more reason in it than there would be in the plea of a man who should object to the hospital because there were cases in it which he thought worse than his own, and some that had to be dismissed as incurable. Those who have so keen a sense of what is inconsistent with "the communion of saints," should give the saints the benefit of their presence, sympathy, influence, advice, and example; that so, the amount of good may be great enough to overbalance or expel the evil.

Not unfrequently, however, an objection of another class sustains itself with more of seeming consistency. It is said that the character and action of Class-Meetings are not equal to their design. That there is a lack of intelligence, discrimination, variety of manner, fitness of treatment, and wise adaptation, amidst the differences of times and circumstance. It is not fair, however, to urge these or any other objections to an institution because in the long course of its working there have been some instances of comparative failure. If the action of the Class-Meeting be fairly looked at from the beginning, through the kingdom, and now throughout the world, its fruits will be found enough to show that, as an institution, it has proved equal to its design. "By their fruits ye shall know them." The deficiencies or failures which are sometimes made the ground of objection are the exceptional things, which naturally enough occur during a long course of Class-Meeting action; resulting, now, from defect of leadership, and now from the people's tendency to fall into stereotyped forms of religious intercourse. It has always been found necessary to guard against the damaging effect of these exceptional failures or declensions. Mr. Wesley, ever watchful against every danger, which threatened the purity

and integrity of Methodist discipline, especially that of the Classes and Bands, saw that objections might arise against Class-Meetings, bearing partly on the Leaders, and partly on the mode of conducting the Class. He asks,

“How may the Leaders of Classes be made more useful?

“1. Let each of them be diligently examined concerning his method of meeting a Class. Let this be done with all possible exactness at the next quarterly visitation. And in order to this, allow sufficient time for the visiting of each Society.

“2. Let each Leader carefully inquire how every soul in his Class prospers; not only how each person observes the outward Rules, but how he grows in the knowledge and love of God.

“3. Let the Leaders converse with the Assistant frequently and freely.

“Can anything farther be done, in order to make the meetings of the Classes lively and profitable?

“1. Change improper Leaders. 2. Let the Leaders frequently meet each other’s Classes. 3. Let us observe which Leaders are the most useful; and let these meet the other Classes as often as possible. 4. See that all the Leaders be not only men of sound judgment, but men truly devoted to God.”*

The purpose of the Class-Meeting requires that the Leader should be religiously intelligent, that he should have spiritual discrimination, and that his judgment in the things of God should be so sound and clear, that he may be faithful to his members, and wise in his choice of means in guiding them. Mr. Wesley records an example which, perhaps, he intended to be a standing illustration of what the character of a true Methodist Leader should be.

“February 2, 1747, I began,” he says, “examining the Classes; having desired the Leaders, such as had leisure, to give me a short account in writing of those under their care. Among many others, I received the following note,—

* J. Wealey’s Works, vol. viii., p. 301.

‘Dear Sir, I hope my Class are bending one way. K. T—,” etc., “seem to retain their confidence in the Lord W. R—,” etc., “seem to be shut up in a fog, and are not able to get out on any side. They are very dead, and yet very sore ; nothing seems to do them any good, unless it be smooth as oil and yet sharp as a razor. M. S—,” etc., “seem to be in earnest, seeking the Lord. J. T—,” etc., “appear to have a desire, and to be widely seeking something. It seems to me we all want advice that is plain and cutting, awakening, and shaking, and hastening us, like that of the angel : ‘Escape for thy life ; look not behind thee, neither tarry thou in all the plain.’ I find the Lord often waking me as with thunder ; yet I find a spirit of stillness and lukewarmness to cleave to me like the skin of my flesh. The Lord shows me at times how insensibly it steals upon me ; and makes me tremble, because I have not been fearing always. May He give us to feel the true state of our souls ! which, I hope, will ever be the prayer of your unworthy son in the Gospel.’

“Hear what this man of God, ‘being dead, yet speaketh.’”*

A Leader’s success in his proper work does not necessarily call for general intelligence, or scientific or literary acumen, or any rare secular accomplishments ; and, therefore, the lack of these can in no case afford a valid objection against Class-Meetings. Pious men from among English courtiers, civil and military officials, clergymen, barristers, physicians, and “merchant princes,” as well as distinguished Christians from the theological, literary, and Biblical circles of other lands, have beautifully shown their appreciation of what properly belongs to this Methodist institution, when they have, from time to time, enjoyed communion in Methodist Class-Meetings ; and gratefully taken spiritual counsel from plain, unlettered, but saintly Class-Leaders. God chooses and calls His work-

* J. Wealey’s Works, vol. ii, pp. 41, 42.

men. And he who is unreserved in his devotion to Christ will be put to his own work as certainly as every sun is fixed in its proper centre. The man who is fit for the work of a Methodist Leader, and is willing to work and be submissive to his Head, will be successful in his place.

During the course of Methodism, many men, doubtless, have had appointments to the office, who have sooner or later shown that, though intelligent and pious, they were not "apt to teach" spiritual things, or more generally have lacked that indefinable kind of sympathy with seekers after holiness, which every fully qualified Methodist Leader possesses; and the result, in such instances, has often helped to give a colour of plausibility to objections to the Class-Meeting itself. The difficulty of securing a sufficient number of qualified Leaders has always been felt. The difficulty would not seem to be greater now than it was at the beginning. The design of the Class-Meeting being the same, so are the qualifications for Leadership. A larger number of Leaders is required now than in earlier times; but the number of members from among whom they are to be chosen is proportionably larger also. The difficulty would greatly grow, however, were the purely spiritual purpose of the Class-Meeting no longer steadily kept in view, and were there a consequent change in the standard of qualification for Leadership. If the Meeting become subservient to demands for mere intellectual exercise or gratification, and at the same time a growing number of the more intellectual or cultured professors of Methodism absent themselves from Class, it will be less and less easy to find adequate supplies of suitable Leaders. In such a case, some show of reason might arise for objections to Class-Meetings, on the ground of frequent defect of management. But this supposes such a change in the spirit, design, and action of the institution as would involve the loss of what is proper to the Methodist Class. Its essence

would be gone. While Methodism is faithful to its calling, its Class-Meetings will be kept to their purpose ; the standard of its Class-Leaders' qualification will be preserved ; and while God blesses the Society with a soul-converting power, there never will be a lack of Leaders, whose successful work will rise above the influence of all unreasonable objections and objectors.

As to the mode of conducting the Class-Meeting, those who look for change, and object to the institution because it is observed in what they call the old-fashioned way, seem to forget that there is no Methodist rule in the case which is inconsistent with variety. No one way is essential while the object of the Meeting is secured. The members must be "united, in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation." And the Leader's duty is to meet his members once a week, to "inquire how their souls prosper," and "to advise, reprove, comfort, or exhort, as occasion may require." All this may be done without unpleasant monotony, or wearisome sameness, or mechanical uniformity. Within the range of its design, the genuine Class-Meeting may be kept as fresh as the spiritual life which the members seek, and may be as happily varied as the weekly lessons of Truth and Grace from above. It has proved possible for the design of the Meetings to be so lost sight of, and their true spirit so far to fail that they have too often run into a groove, out of which neither Leader nor members have seemed able to turn ; but even that fact yields no solid argument against the institution itself. Class-Meetings, as to their mode of working, are just what they are made by those who attend them ; and it would be better for those who keep outside, because things within are not, in their opinion, as they should be, if, instead of trying to satisfy their conscience by framing objections, they would give Methodist Class-

Meetings the advantage of their enlightenment, and help to make them in spirit and manner fully equal to their design.

The largest class of objectors to the Class-Meeting is marked by Mr. Wesley with his usual precision. "Others honestly say, 'I do not know why, but I do not like it.'" Objections of this class spring from the deepest source; they come from the depths of that "natural" mind of which an Apostle said, it "receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned."* "I do not like it; I do not know why." Nothing could be more expressive of the blind carnal instinct which rises against the "spiritual" wherever or whenever it puts forth its claim whether in the Class-Meeting or anywhere else. That instinct which thinks not, reasons not, "knows not why;" but dislikes what is not of the world but of God.

One who is ruled by this bent of mind does not like the Class simply because the design of it is too spiritual for the carnal taste. Were such a soul really to press the question on itself, it might soon know why it shrank from spiritual company and spiritual pursuits. What reason for this dislike would be found? Is it that the soul's fear of God is so slavish as to be mastered by "the fear of man?" or, is it, that in deference to human opinion, or custom, or fashion, or interest, it is ashamed of Christ and His words? or, is it, that the man is rendered unequal to religious decision by his fond abandonment to the love of the world? is the plea still, "I do not know why?" Let the conscience ask itself, "Are the consolations of God small with thee? Is there any secret thing with thee? Why doth thine heart carry thee away? and what do thine eyes wink at, that thou turnest thy spirit against God, and lettest such words go out of thy mouth?"† There is always some

* 1 Corinthians ii. 14.

† Job xv. 11—13.

hidden reason for dislike to spiritual companionship, association with unworldly minds, and identity with decidedly religious pursuits ; always some hidden reason for a man's withholding himself from the use of such means as are distinctive of true Christian discipleship ; and the true reason is the deeper when the objector to Church fellowship can excuse himself by no express reason, or when no reason is visible to others. "I do not like it," is, as Mr. Wesley says, the "honest" confession ; but why not "like it?" No other reason being apparent, the secret must be in that mysterious chamber which the undecided man has never yet allowed his closest and dearest friend to pry into. What if God were to throw it open ! What "secret faults," what "secret sins," would be set "in the light of His countenance?"* This heart-searching God once said to Ezekiel, in vision, "Son of man, dig now in the wall ; and when I had digged in the wall," says the prophet, "behold a door. And he said unto me, Go in, and behold the wicked abominations that they do here. So I went in and saw ; and behold every form of creeping things, and abominable beasts, and all the idols of the house of Israel, portrayed upon the wall round about. And there stood before them seventy men of the ancients of the house of Israel, and in the midst of them stood Jaazaniah, the son of Shaphan, with every man his censer in his hand ; and a thick cloud of incense went up. Then said He unto me, Son of man, hast thou seen what the ancients of the house of Israel do in the dark, every man in the chambers of his imagery ? For they say, The Lord seeth us not."† Is this symbolical of spiritual facts that repeat themselves in the history of the Church, and repeat themselves to-day in connection with Methodism ? It might seem so. We may be permitted to have a kind of prophetic insight into those most retired chambers of the human heart, in which

* Psalm xix. 12; xc. 8.

† Ezekiel viii. 8—12.

the unexpressed, if not inexpressible reasons for aversion to pure Christian discipline and fellowship hold their secret sway, and receive unobserved homage amidst carefully confined fumes of selfish feeling.

In some Methodist congregations the number of silent objectors to professed membership in the Society is perhaps quietly on the increase. Of how many is it said, that they worship here, or sit under the ministry there? They come and go with mechanical regularity, and preserve a decent outward reverence during the solemnities of public devotion. Their uniformity of attention seems to show no weariness. Their Sabbath order has no break. There appears to be nothing that is inconsistent with a more decided connection with the Church, and a more active association with its spiritual work. Their constancy as hearers, if not any manifest feeling, often begets a hope in those who are interested in their soul's welfare, that they are coming nearer to the Society in spirit, and are growingly disposed to give themselves unreservedly to the service of Christ. But no; a personal appeal, a close question, is soon met by a cool response; and it becomes clear that there is nothing in them like a lively sense of obligation to identify themselves with the more spiritual pursuits and designs of Methodism. They do not give their reasons; but Class-Meeting is not in their way. These seemingly all but Christians, all but Methodists, often move the wonder of their more decided neighbours, and are looked at with compassionate love, even when the mystery of their case severely tests the most charitable hope. But, by and by, Providence discloses a "door in the wall," within which the long-cherished secrets of their negative condition have been hid. The chamber of imagery is thrown open; and it becomes clear that had they explained the reason of their long unaccountable perseverance in silent objection to close Christian intercourse, they might have done so by using the

apostolic inquiry, “What fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness ? and what communion hath light with darkness ? And what concord hath Christ with Belial ? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel ? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols ? ”*

All people are judged from above according to the measure of their advantages. “That servant, which knew his Lord’s will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to His will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required : and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more.”† “Take heed therefore how ye hear : for whosoever hath, to him shall be given ; and whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he seemeth to have.”‡ Every man has his stewardship under Christ. The reward of the faithful steward accumulates just as he gathers profit from the talents which he holds in trust ; and at the same time, the worth of his character rises towards the height of his final reward ; while he is faithfully improving what his Lord has allotted to him. On the other hand, the unhappy one who does not fulfil his Lord’s design, but holds His entrusted gifts in profitless keeping, under the semblance of honest readiness to reckon with his Master, and render back His due, not only loses the reward of integrity and diligence, but suffers the penalty of hopeless distress ; while his Lord shows the justice of the penalty by disclosing the wickedness which had been corrupting his heart, while he kept up an appearance of honest stewardship.

To be, under Providence, a decent member of a Methodist congregation is no small advantage. It is to have clear and decided views of saving truth kept before the mind, to have

* 2 Corinthians vi. 14—16. † Luke xii. 47, 48. ‡ Luke viii. 18.

a present salvation ever pressed upon the soul, the necessity of the new birth ceaselessly urged upon the conscience, and the love and service of Christ warmly recommended to the heart. Methodist preaching, too, having the conversion of souls and the spread of holiness as its object, is associated with all those prayers, and invitations, and influences by which Methodist Societies seek to draw the hearers of truth into Christian fellowship and co-operation with the Church ; while Society membership secures opportunities of usefulness, whose variety, adaptation, holy excitement, cheerful companionship, growing interest, and fulness, breadth, and continuance of success and reward, more happily engage the gifts and graces of hallowed human nature than, perhaps, those of any other ecclesiastical organization in the world.

To be every week within reach of advantages like these, is to be among those "to whom much is given," it is to be a steward entrusted with many "talents." The responsibility is great. Much will be required. And if, after all, a soul so privileged and so responsible should be found an unprofitable servant, and that which he had, but had to no purpose, is taken away from him, how deep and dark will be the scene of his despair ! What will be the personal reflections of the fruitless hearer who, after being so long near to the faithful, finds himself for ever among the faithless ? Such final failures come not suddenly. They may at first startle those who had not observed the secret process of declension. None but the Heart-searcher may watch the stages of inner movement, from the first admission of groundless objection to decided union with the Church, through the successive indulgences of unholy thought and feeling that gradually strengthened the unbelieving heart against the truth, down to the last inward act of submission to evil, which completes the fixedness of carnal habit.

St. Paul might be thought to mark this inward progress

of corruption on the part of those who, when all expressed objections have been silenced, allow the concealed instinct of their carnal nature to suggest excuses for withholding themselves from the Christian profession. He records the fearful changes in the history of some, who, in his time, gradually fell victims to fatal error, because they closed their hearts against saving truth. But his record is an authorized illustration of the fixed law which rules all cases of spiritual neglect and unfaithfulness to the word of Christ. They "that perish," says he, had become subject to "the working of Satan;" and the "deceivableness of unrighteousness; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie : that they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness."*

The stages of this advance to death run one into the other with awful noiselessness and unobserved certainty. Those who do not receive the love of the truth, who simply prefer their own way for the present, without any manifest aversion to what is good, have begun a movement towards something worse ; that worse thing is, that they confirm themselves in unbelief by forming a secret attachment to sin, thus placing themselves a stage more distant from goodness and truth ; and then their continued indulgence of love to sin results at last in judicial blindness as a prelude and foretaste of final condemnation. Those who have lived long under the Methodist Ministry ; born, perhaps, and brought up among Methodists ; and yet show no sign of nearer approach to a living place in the Church of their fathers and friends, have reasons for "great searchings of heart." Where is the secret of their isolation ? Can they give a reason to themselves sufficient to secure the testimony of a good conscience ? Are they prepared with reasons that will satisfy Him from

* 2 Thessalonians ii. 9—12.

Whose disciples they have withheld their company, from Whose Church they have kept back their full sympathy, influence and powers, and to Whose Name they have failed to render the homage of a fully consecrated life ? Before it be too late, let them listen to a voice that lives still for the benefit of all who will follow in the speaker's steps. Let them hear John Wesley. Let them open their hearts to his appeals, be ruled by his reasons, and follow his advice.

" You are not in the Society. But why not ? Are there not sufficient arguments for it to move any reasonable man ? Do you not hereby make an open confession of Christ, of what you really believe to be His work, and of those whom you judge to be, in a proper sense, His people and His messengers ? By this means do not you encourage His people, and strengthen the hands of His messengers ? And is not this the way to enter into the spirit, and share the blessing of a Christian community ? Hereby, likewise, you may have the benefit of the advices and exhortations at the meeting of the Society ; and also of provoking one another at the private meetings to love and to good works.

" The ordinary objections to such a union are of little weight with you. You are not afraid of the expense. You already give unto the Lord as much as you need do then, and you are not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, even in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation. Perhaps, you will say, ' I am joined in affection.' True, but not to so good effect. This joining half-way, this being a friend to, but not a member of the Society, is by no means so open a confession of the work and servants of God. Many go thus far, who dare not go farther, who are ashamed to bear the reproach of an entire union. Either you are ashamed or you are not. If you are, break through at once ; if you are not, come into the light, and do what those well-meaning cowards dare not do. This imperfect union is not so encouraging to the people, not so strengthening to the

Preachers. Rather it is weakening their hands, hindering their work, and laying a stumbling-block in the way of others ; for what can any man think, who knows you are so well acquainted with them, and yet do not join in their Society ? What can he think, but that you know them too well to come any nearer to them ; that you know that kind of union to be useless, if not hurtful ? And yet, by this very union is the whole (external) work of God upheld throughout the nation ; besides all the spiritual good which accrues to each member. O, delay no longer, for the sake of the work, for the sake of the world, for the sake of your brethren ! Join them inwardly and outwardly, heart and hand, for the sake of your own soul. There is something not easily explained in the fellowship of the Spirit, which we enjoy with a Society of living Christians. You have no need to give up your share therein, and in the various blessings that result from it. You have no need to exclude yourself from the benefit of the advice and exhortations given from time to time. These are by no means to be despised, even supposing you have yourself more understanding than him that gives them. You need not lose the benefit of those prayers which experience shows are attended with a peculiar blessing. ‘But I do not care to meet a Class ; I find no good in it.’ Suppose you find even a dislike, a loathing of it ; may not this be natural, or even diabolical ? In spite of this, break through, make a fair trial. It is but a lion in the way. Meet only six times (with previous prayer), and see if it do not vanish away. But if it be a cross, still bear it for the sake of your brethren. ‘But I want to gain my friends and relations.’ If so, stand firm. If you give way, you hurt them, and they will press upon you the more. If you do not, you will probably gain them, otherwise you confirm both their wrong notions and wrong tempers. Because I love you I have spoken fully and freely ; to know that I have not spoken in

vain will be a great satisfaction to your affectionate brother."*

This appeal might have been written for these times ; when in so many instances congregations increase where Societies diminish : times, when so many people are learning to call themselves Methodists though they never meet in Class ; alleging reasons which so long ago were shown to be groundless ; or having reasons which they keep to themselves ; reasons that have no voice : times in which there is so much friendliness towards the Methodist Society on the part of those, who, by remaining outside, show themselves to be no friends, either to their own spiritual interest, or to the real prosperity of Methodism. This barren border-class increases, it may be, under the influence of bad example,—the example of half-hearted, irregular, inconsistent Methodists,—Methodists so called, Methodists who are "neither cold nor hot,"—members in a way, having their names on the Class-book, while they attend only just often enough to prevent self-exclusion. They have no objections to the Class-Meeting, but are ready with excuses for frequently neglecting it. Now, business ; now, recreation ; now, friends ; now, distance ; now, infirmity ; each and all are made plausible in turn. Their money is duly there, but they, seldom. The Class-book account might be a record of efforts to "serve God and Mammon." It is not difficult to trace this disorder and neglect to worldliness or selfishness, in one or other of their many forms. In some cases, the fruitless members have been caught in the whirls, or eddies, or rapid currents of modern trade and commerce ; and in others, lulled by prosperity,

"In soft *Laodicean* ease
They sleep their useless lives away."

But the secret of the mischief lies deeper. The evil is

* J. Wesley's Works, vol. iii., pp. 188, 189.

in the very heart's core. There is a lack of spiritual life ; or that life is in rapid decay. Some, perhaps, joined the Society with a "desire to flee from the wrath to come;" but did not cherish that desire so as to give it a commanding influence over their character. They allowed their good feelings no more than a subordinate sway, with the notion that all that is necessary in religion may be found without allowing religious affairs to interfere with, or materially to alter that course of action which they had hitherto pursued in life. There was something in their experience like a shadowy figure of repentance, but no clear outline, no bold feature, no distinguishing expression, no stirring life. So, never realizing a distinct change of character, they have never become fully distinct from the world. Or, if strong conviction had given a tone of decision to their character, and they had been seemingly fixed in some of the "principles of the doctrine of Christ," yet weary at length of so warm a pursuit, or fearful of being thought singular, they yield to expediency, give place to circumstances, and accommodate themselves to custom, until the shades of their character so melt into the world, that they can no longer be easily distinguished from it. As a consequence, their appearance in the Class-Meeting becomes a mere occasional form.

Others may have been soundly converted ; and for a time may have enjoyed "the communion of saints ;" but they have *left their first love*. Their spiritual life has quailed under outward influences, or has become sickly amidst indulged "desires of other things ;" and so their spiritual sense has become weak, and their spiritual appetite fails. They belong to the class represented by the Methodist who, when his Leader inquired why he had not been at the meeting lately, replied, "Because I have lost my relish." Here is the true cause of infrequent and uncertain attention to the more spiritual means of Christian fellowship. The

Class-book is generally a true index to the spiritual condition of Methodists. The lack of order, punctuality, and diligence there, is for the most part, the lack of spiritual life, health, and power.

Mr. Wesley, who was always keenly alive to the first appearance of evil, says of a Society at St. Just-in-the-West, "I found no Society in Cornwall so lively as this ; yet a few of them I was obliged to reprove for negligence in meeting, which is always the forerunner of greater evils."* These evils accumulate upon the careless ones themselves. But the bad influence of their example upon others cannot be estimated. Its effect is disastrous upon those multitudes who repose amidst the privileges of hearers in the congregation, and who catch at any excuses for not joining the Society ; especially excuses afforded by the example of those who practically declare that Class-Meeting fellowship is neither a privilege nor a duty. Alas for the examples and those who follow them ! Negligent Methodists ! Look to yourselves ! "Repent, and do the first works ; or else" He "will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place !" Look at those around you ; and ask your hearts, how far your own spiritual weakness and your consequent faithlessness to Methodism, hinders their reception of the truth, and their union with Christ and His people ! "These things saith He that hath the seven spirits of God, and the seven stars ; I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die : for I have not found thy works perfect before God. Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee. Thou hast a

* J. Wesley's Works, vol. ii., p. 28.

few names . . . which have not defiled their garments ; and they shall walk with Me in white : for they are worthy.”*

Yes ! blessed be God ! There are a few, yea many, in Methodism faithful still to her rule of spiritual communion ; because they “ have not defiled their garments,” but continue to walk with Jesus in company with those who meet together in His name. “ A few ? ” More than a few !

“ All are not lost, or wander’d back ;
All have not left Thy Church and Thee ;
There are who suffer for Thy sake,
Enjoy Thy glorious infamy,
Esteem the scandal of the Cross,
And only seek Divine applause.”

There are thousands still, thousands throughout the world, to whom the discipline of the Class-Meeting is a weekly joy, and with whom are deposited the secrets of Methodist spiritual power ; in whose personal devotion, mutual intercourse, and combined pursuit of holiness, there lives the promise of that glorious issue which Methodist Class-Meetings were designed to promote.

Are you among these ? Then, look upon those who deprive themselves of the ‘ helps, powers, and consolations which you enjoy ; pity them ; pray for them ; try to quicken and restore them ; but listen to the voices of love that come to you ! The Church of your fathers says ; the Head of that Church Himself, Jesus, says, “ Will ye also go away ? ” Methodism wants you. Christ, your Saviour, wants your deepest sympathy and closest companionship ; “ will ye also go away ? ” God forbid ! Whither should we go ? No ; keep together, keep to Methodism, keep to Christ ! For your Lord’s sake ; for the sake of the world which He has redeemed ; for the sake of Methodism, to

* Revelation iii. 1—4.

which you owe so much ; and for your own soul's sake, "consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works : not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is ; but exhorting one another : and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching."* For Scripture, reason, history, and experience have combined to show, that if, as a people, Methodists are to be kept purely distinct from the world ; if they are to be holy in their influence upon the churches around them ; if Methodist preaching is to keep its converting and sanctifying power ; if Methodist people are to be saved from undue confidence in the virtue of sacramental forms, and preserve their praying power and jubilant grace ; if all Methodists are to be successful labourers, and all Methodist agencies are to be fruitful ; if all the offerings of Methodism are to be hallowed and equal to their purposes ; if Methodist consistency is finally to silence all gainsayers ; and, in short, if Methodism is to be equal to its design, and successfully to fulfil it ;—the Class-Meeting must be sacredly held as essential to Methodist life.

* Hebrews x. 24, 25.





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